TAPPEI
NAGATSUKI
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SHINICHIROU
OTSUKA
25
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

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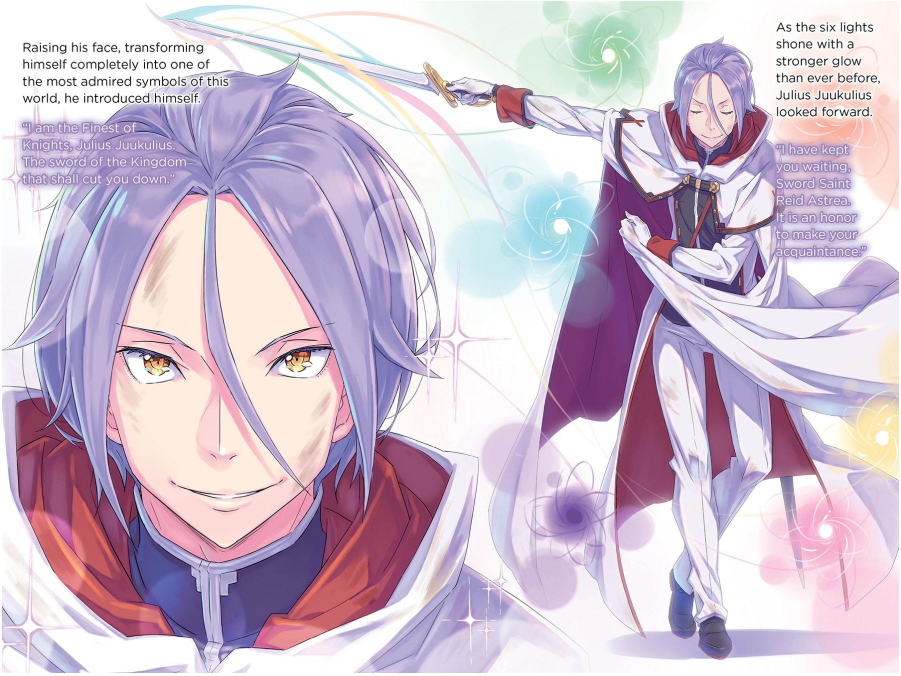
-Starting Life in Another World-

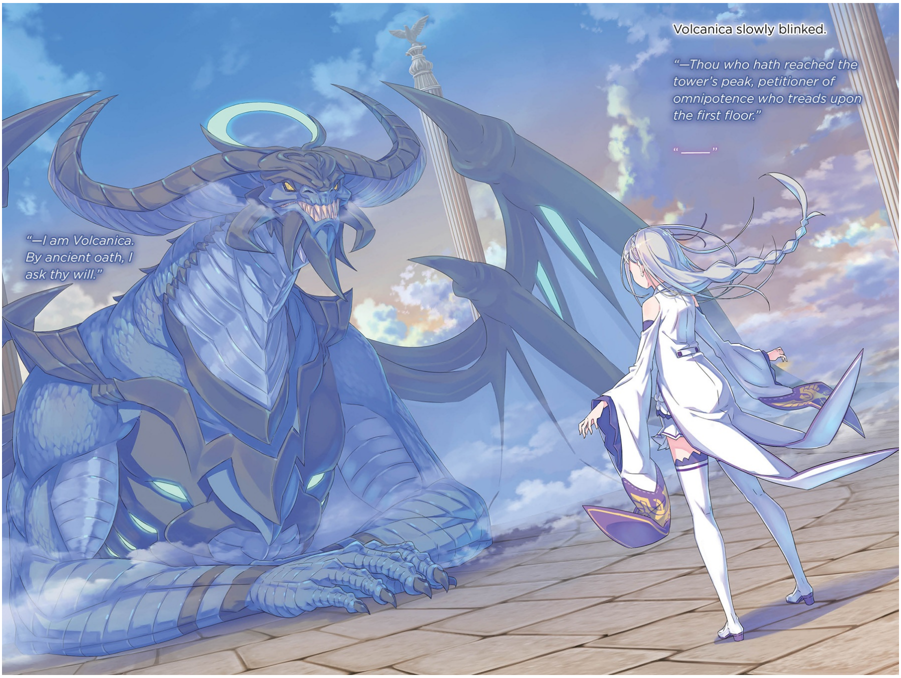


Raising his face, transforming himself completely into one of the most admired symbols of this world, he introduced himself.

"I am the Finest of Knights, Julius Juukulius. The sword of the Kingdom that shall cut you down."

As the six lights shone with a stronger glow than ever before, Julius Juukulius looked forward.

"I have kept you waiting, Sword Saint Reid Astrea. It is an honor to make your acquaintance."

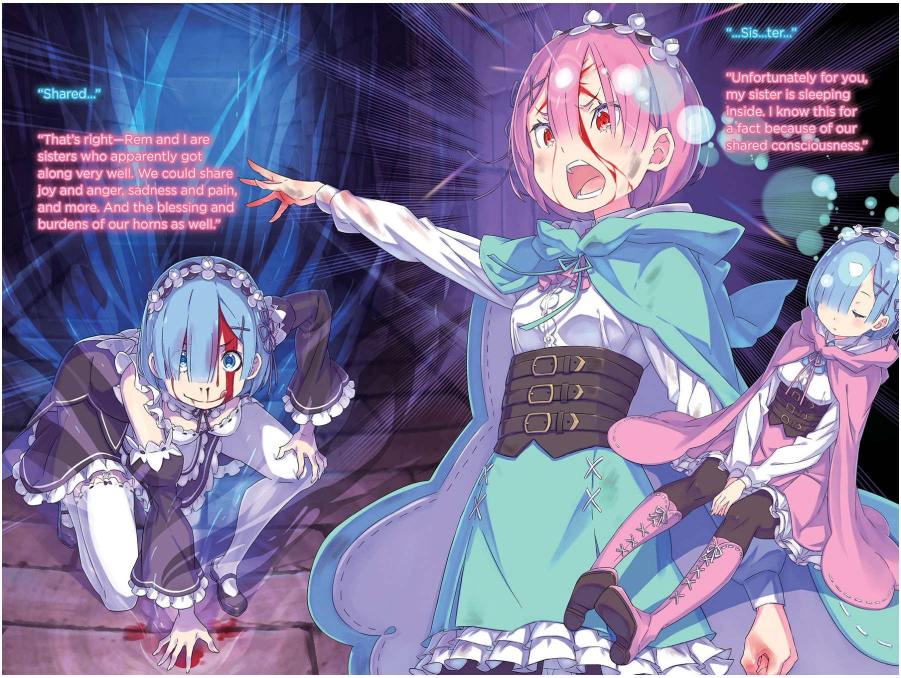


Volcanica slowly blinked.

"—Thou who hath reached the tower's peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor."

"——"

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."


"...Sis...ter..."
"Unfortunately for you, my sister is sleeping inside. I know this for a fact because of our shared consciousness."
"Shared..."
"That's right—Rem and I are sisters who apparently got along very well. We could share joy and anger, sadness and pain, and more. And the blessing and burdens of our horns as well."

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

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Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-

VOLUME 25

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

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TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

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CHAPTER 1

■■■■■■ ■■■■■■■

1

—As he fell from the tower, his final words were lost in the wind right before Natsuki Subaru's consciousness cut to black.

“————”

It was a bit cynical to think so, but death this time was calculated. He had probed Shaula's motives, uncovered the hidden fifth rule of the tower, and confirmed that saving Shaula wasn't just something he desperately wanted to do but was also the right thing to do.

Subaru had found all the answers he wanted. Maybe that was why he felt oddly calm in the face of death. Of course, there was still the inevitable dread that came with jumping to his own death, but…

“Huh, this is probably the first time I've ever confronted death so fully.”

He didn't delude himself into believing that committing suicide here was going to save Shaula. She'd begged for the order to kill herself rather than to watch him die, and instead, he had jumped to his death right before her very eyes. He couldn't even imagine how that would affect someone who had been waiting for four hundred years.

No, this was nothing more than an act of self-gratification. What made it worse was that he wouldn't even be sticking around to see the result.

“…So what?”

Even if it was just self-gratification or hypocrisy, what did it matter?

In the end, how you take things is up to you. A good deed that can never be done is meaningless, and taken to the extreme, hypocrisy—false virtue—doesn't exist.

Now that he'd hashed things out with Shaula, Subaru settled on his endgame—everyone had to make it out alive. They would resolve this crisis in the desert tower without losing anyone. And that included Shaula.

I'll do whatever it takes. That's…

"That's why I exist. Isn't that right, *Natsuki Subaru*?"

In the same instant that he steeled his resolve, something awakened in the bottomless abyss of death—

2

"—Subaru."

Right after his consciousness broke the surface, he saw familiar blue eyes marked by an unmistakable pattern. Beatrice was right in front of him, peering at him in concern.

Subaru gulped ever so slightly when he felt her small hand brush against his cheek.

It was so impossibly warm after he had just experienced death.

"Are you fully awake now? You were inside the book for so long, it was starting to become worrying. It would be best to make sure no memories slipped out of your head along the way, I suppose. To start, what do you remember about Betty…?"

"You're Beatrice, obviously…"

"…It seems you at least remember that much. Good boy."

Her hand moved from his cheek to rub his head. Subaru savored that ticklish feeling as his mind processed everything that had happened and figured out where he was now.

This was the moment he returned from his encounter with Louis Arneb in the corridors of memory. The reset point was unchanged, which meant…

"This is count zero— Our counterattack starts now."

Beatrice's big eyes blinked quizzically.

He was going to need a lot of help from Beatrice in the coming fight. But he had no intention of revealing his goals or what he would do to achieve them.

Beatrice was kind. So, so kind. That's why Subaru was sure that if she knew what he was planning, she would absolutely be against it. And she wasn't the only one.

"So, how was it? Did you get what you were after in the book?" Beatrice asked, holding said book in her lap.

"About that…"

For everyone else, this moment was right after he tested his luck on the book of the dead, hoping to find a strategy for defeating Reid Astrea.

For complicated reasons, that had failed. It felt quite a long time ago now because of how much had happened, but that was a Subaru problem.

I know what I need to do, and where I can't afford to fail.

"Beatrice, it's going to get a little busy. Lend me your strength."

"…Of course. We're partners."

Even without any explanation, she immediately accepted.

Having her here puts my ■■■■■ at ease…

3

Light poured into Subaru's eyes as he stared in wonder at the state of the second floor.

Up the large staircase, what should have greeted them was a great, white void. Instead, what should have been an empty space was marred by the scars of a furious battle that had left deep gouges in the floors, the walls, and the ceiling.

We're not allowed to destroy the tower. If that's the rule that was broken…

"The tower's tests shouldn't be allowed to break the tower's rules. That guy's a troublemaker no matter what he's doing…," Subaru murmured bitterly.

"—Ah? The hell? I was wondering who was comin', but it's just you?"

The red-haired hero standing in the middle of the ravaged second floor turned and scrunched up his nose in annoyance.

It was exactly the sort of thing Reid Astrea would say. That attitude perfectly lined up with Subaru's impression of the man. If anything was different, it was the battered boy he was holding aloft with one hand.

"Kah-ha-ha…"

The boy's eyes looked half-dead. Subaru had not met him face-to-face before, but his face seemed familiar, resembling Lye Batenkaitos's. This had to be…

"…Gluttony. Roy Alphard."

It wasn't Subaru who said that. It was Julius, the handsome young man clad in white who raced up the stairs close on Subaru's heels. Right after he woke up, Subaru took Beatrice and headed straight for the second floor, grabbing Julius along the way.

The goal had been to stop Reid and Roy from making contact, but…

"Even coming straight here still wasn't good enough…"

This was the fastest he could theoretically reach this point, given when and where he started. It would be impossible to prevent the Sword Saint and the Archbishop of Gluttony from making contact. At the same time, it was clear their first meeting wasn't exactly copacetic.

Given the signs of damage, it must have been some battle these two had fought. Most likely Gluttony had used all the ultimate techniques he had ever gobbled up to corner Reid. Unfortunately, no matter what he pulled out, it wouldn't be enough to best this immovable object.

"So, what're you gonna do? I know the tower's goin' to shit, so why are you here? You wanna take your examination? A small fry and a rug rat aren't enough to entertain me…"

"First, I would ask you to release him, Reid Astrea."

"The hell you say?"

Still holding Roy by the ankle, Reid picked at his ear with his free hand, growling in annoyance. But Julius didn't wither under Reid's gaze.

"Allow me to repeat myself. Release him. The fight is clearly over. There's no need to denigrate the defeated further."

"I don't feel like it. And who do you think you're orderin' around? He a friend of yours or something?"

"No. I can say with quite some confidence he is not. The Archbishop of Gluttony is in fact a bitter enemy I would gladly fight to the death."

"Eh? Then why so pissy? Mad I got to him first?"

"Because you are sullying the pride of a swordsman."

After coming face-to-face with the man named the Sword Saint, a title only meant for those who stood at the very peak of sword skill—and the first man to ever receive the title—Julius declared him lacking.

In response to a statement that could only be interpreted as contempt, Reid exhaled deeply.

"—The pride of a swordsman, huh?"

Subaru could feel that whisper scorch the very air. Even though it was quiet and sounded almost indifferent, it was a sign that the first Sword Saint Reid Astrea was about to erupt.

"Hey, how long are you gonna nap? Get up already."

"Ghggg!"

There was a terrible groan as he clenched his fist around Roy's ankle so tightly, it seemed like he might crush it entirely. The boy cried out in pain as Reid looked down at the drooling, upside-down Archbishop.

"What you said before. About eating me up and gobbling me up and all that—I'll let you do it."

"…Gee-hee. Kah-ha-ha-ha-ha! What?! What's this, all of a sudden?! You beat us and pummeled us and battered us because you *didn't* want to do that!"

"Changed my mind— Ah, right."

Reid grinned like a shark and held up his free hand.

He had no problem catching the tip of the whip aimed at his neck

—completely thwarting Subaru's surprise attack.

"Ah…"

Unfortunately, since he had forgotten how to actually use the whip, Subaru had simply mimicked what he had seen before.

"No hesitation. I can respect that. Limper than a wet noodle, though!"

After offering that bit of feedback, Reid yanked the whip. Subaru tried to hold on, but that just meant he was pulled off his feet.

"Wh-whoaaaaa?!" "Subaru!"

Beatrice grabbed onto Subaru and went along for the ride. They flew in an arc and looked like they were due for a bad landing, but Beatrice managed to control their fall with her magic.

"Subaru! Lady Beatri—"

"Heads up, dumbass."

"Ghh, ahhh!"

Reid noticed Julius's lapse in attention and promptly kicked the knight aside. Julius managed to raise his sword to block, but he couldn't lessen the impact and found himself hurtling through the vast, white space.

And before any of them could do anything else—

"Give it your best shot. Can you wolf me down? Will you live or will you die?"

"—Ahhh, yeah, yeah! Got it. We got it. We get it. We understand. All is understood! That's why! Gluttony! Gluttony!"

Still hanging upside down, Roy howled with glee in Reid's face. Then the Archbishop of Gluttony reached out, putting his hand over the eye patch covering Reid's left eye.

And then his mouth cracked wide open.

"Reid Astrea."

That was all Roy said before he started furiously slurping to devour something invisible to the naked eye. This was Gluttony's meal and the exact moment he desecrated a being's very existence to sate his voracious hunger.

"Ah."

The change was sudden and swift. Reid disappeared like he was a figment of the imagination.

His tall, imposing figure had simply vanished, and Roy, who had been held by the ankle, fell to the floor. Roy landed lightly, licking his lips in rapture.

"Ahhh, incredible…! We imagined so many different flavors, wondering what it might taste like, but…it's so much better than we imagined!"

"Damn, it's too late…!"

"Ah-ha-ha, you saw, right?! We ate! We ate it! What a rich flavor!

We would eat anything, but after tasting that, even we can see a bit of Lye's… Oh."

Roy arched over backward, cheeks red, as he ranted about how Reid tasted. It was the worst sort of food review imaginable—but he was cut short.

For Subaru, who knew what happened next, the reaction was already expected.

"Wh-what's happening now…?" Beatrice murmured in disgust.

"W-w-w-wait, eeep, gee-hee, gee-heee… This is…this is weird. This is weird, isn't it?! Th-this is…you're weird, you bastard!"

Holding Beatrice's hand, Subaru gritted his teeth.

Roy's expression changed. A twisted smile suddenly appeared on his face. A familiar sharklike grin.

"Nothin' weird about it. Eat or be eaten. That's life."

Grinning savagely, the boy said something that sounded nothing like Gluttony… And then it happened. Even though they didn't so much as blink, none of them caught the crucial turning point. That was just how natural the shift was.

"Ahhh, a real, live body is just *different*. I can feel the blood pumpin' through my veins."

In the blink of an eye, there had been a substitution, and just like that, the ferocious Reid Astrea stole the Archbishop of Gluttony's body and returned to the world of the living.

"Reid Astrea appeared in the Archbishop's place…"

"More precisely, he took advantage of Gluttony's authority to re-create someone they've eaten and then overwrote his consciousness… Right?"

"Spare me that complicated crap. How should I know? Not like it even matters. Small fry spouting that… Huh? You… This is… Ah, I know what you are."

"? What?"

He took over his new body through sheer force of will, but that seemed like a secondary concern to Reid. He frowned, seemingly reflecting on something for once, and then his blue eyes focused on Subaru.

"—You're disgusting."

The next instant, he launched a chopstick at Subaru's face.

"Ngh!"

Before Subaru could even register that it would punch right through his skull, a smooth flash of steel cut down the projectile. Leaping in at the last moment, Julius saved him.

Julius's white cape fluttered as Subaru gasped.

"Reid! Your opponent is—!"

"You? No way you can tangle with me while worrying about that little princess behind you!"

Julius moved as fast as a hurricane, but Reid closed in even faster.

A twisting palm thrust landed square in the center of Julius's chest, hurling him backward while he coughed up blood. He tried to kill the momentum with his long legs, but he just kept flying.

And then Reid turned his attention to Subaru, who had lost Julius's protection.

"You've lost your pathetic prince now, Princess."

"I object to those titles…but it bought me the time I need!"

"Ah?"

Just before the chopstick flashed, Subaru and Beatrice slipped in front of Julius.

Clasping both her hands, using all of Subaru's paltry MP, Beatrice activated a big spell to manipulate space itself.

"Ul Shamak."

Right after her incantation finished, a massive black hole appeared.

An endless, bottomless, black hole evoking a primordial fear attempted to swallow Reid whole and send him to the great beyond.

Space twisted, and Beatrice's spell—

"What is this, a breeze? There's nothing special about a breeze you can find anywhere. You think that'll stop me?"

Reid casually silenced the massive spell with a single swing of his chopstick.

Dimension Slash—an attack so powerful that anyone else would consider it their ultimate move, and Reid used it incredibly casually. The slash's blast wave raced toward Subaru and Beatrice. He hurried to get Beatrice to safety when—

"Gaaaaaa!!!"

"Subaru!"

A burning sensation accompanied the feeling of his body splitting open.

Beatrice and Julius shouted as he fell backward. The blood and pain welling up made Subaru want to cry out, but he desperately held it in.

"I'm…fine…"

He shook his head, not wanting them to worry. Of course, it was going to take more than that to convince them.

The wound on my chest is shallow. Okay, it isn't shallow, but it doesn't hurt, either. Now I'm definitely lying to myself, but it doesn't hurt so much that I can't take it. Anyway, it's terrible, but it's fine. Beatrice didn't get caught up in it. That's what matters. I can't let this guy out of my sight.

Keeping his eyes forward, Subaru watched Reid like a hawk.

"You think you can reach me like that?"

Reid watched in exasperation as blood trickled from the corner of Subaru's mouth.

Subaru stuck out his arm and held up one finger.

"—Yeah. I will."

Somewhere, someday, I will.

Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Rem, Meili, Echidna, Julius, Shaula, Patrasche, everyone I care about. I'll save them all.

Every last one.

So right now—

"Add one to the counter."

He would die as many times as it took to make this counterattack succeed. He would become the true Natsuki Subaru.

And as Subaru made that final declaration, Reid's blue eye flashed—

Round 1

- Reid and Gluttony's battle cannot be prevented. Preventing their merger is virtually impossible.
- Julius has a chance of winning.
- Natsuki Subaru has no hope of winning.

4

Tremors raced all around the stone tower's passage.

A beautiful dance of ice and snow unfolded as vicious, murderous blades of wind filled the air. They chased the grinning defiler mercilessly but never quite managed to finish the job.

"Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! Not bad, not bad, not bad. You're really something. Truly merciless, which is all the more reason! Gluttony! Gluttony!"

"You still have time to play about? That is quite the composure you have."

Lye Batenkaitos, an Archbishop of Gluttony, was demonstrating a phantasmagoric, ever-changing style of combat. He kept standing on walls and, now, the ceiling.

Ram was hot on his heels, chasing doggedly even as she strained against her body's poor condition. The slender girl positioned herself perfectly and sent Lye's small body flying backward with a heavy blow. Lying in wait for this exact moment—

"Wind up and bam!!!"

Emilia readied the massive ice hammer in her hands and swung for the fences. The hammer was as big as a person's torso and connected with Lye's back. After a sharp crack, Lye started bouncing like a rubber ball—in fact, he was bouncing too much.

The Archbishop had launched himself off the hammer, acrobatically dispersing the force of the impact and avoiding a deadly blow.

Lye had consumed martial arts masters from all over, and he wielded every sort of martial art imaginable. His ability to react was transcendent, and his combat sense was outstanding as well, allowing him to respond with the perfect technique with perfect timing.

The memories he stole included their previous owners' physical experiences, too. That much was clear from the way Subaru couldn't remember how to use the whip that he carried on him. Why had the original Subaru chosen something so difficult to use as his primary weapon?

He probably thought a versatile whip would be more useful than something more standard like a sword or spear.

"I can get on board with that, but it's a real problem at times like this…!"

"For times like this, what you need is Betty!"

She held Subaru's hand and reached out with her other arm, summoning dozens of purple gleaming crystals. They were all aimed at Lye, his defenseless back wide open while he was pinned between Emilia and Ram at the other end of the passage.

"El Minya!"

With one wave of her small arm, she shot the purple missiles toward Lye's small body. The resulting purple blasts swallowed up the small Archbishop, and the sound of glass shattering filled the air.

Beatrice had used a terrifying spell that stopped time for the target, turning them into a fragile, easily broken crystal. In that state, even a glancing blow would be lethal. And the fusillade had been virtually impossible to avoid in this narrow passage.

When the light show died down, Lye was…

"—Eh?! He's gone?!"

Emilia's eyes widened as she stared at the epicenter of the explosion. Subaru and Beatrice were stunned as well.

As their confusion grew, Ram was the first to understand what had happened.

"Barusu!"

Spinning around, she shouted, pink eyes wide open.

It was an unusually desperate expression for her, and seeing that helped Subaru figure out that the threat was behind him now.

And that he wouldn't have a chance to turn and face that enemy.

"—Even for us, having to deal with that over and over again would be annoying."

They could hear Lye’s sneering voice as he reappeared after escaping the mass of purple missiles.

This was Leaping Dorkel’s Teleportation ability, a sort of short-range warp. It was the worst possible matchup for their plan to surround the Archbishop.

As that realization dawned in Subaru’s mind—

“Subar—”

Thought does not always translate into action correctly, and the ■■■■■ and the body are rarely perfectly aligned.

After he reflexively pushed her small body away, a sharp feeling tore deep into his chest.

“Ngh!”

The terrible pain immediately made him regret his decision. Sadly, there weren’t any better shields.

It terrified him that if he had been any slower, Beatrice would have been cut down. Becoming a meat shield was nothing compared to that possibility. It hurt. It definitely hurt. But the pain was temporary. Not that temporary. But better this than letting his ■■■■■ be wounded. Better than letting his ■■■■■ die.

“Subaru—!!!”

A high voice rang out in the hall as Subaru’s body slumped to the floor, unable even to crack a joke.

He held in the cry that threatened to break free. *It wouldn’t make this any better. I can’t bother anyone else or risk hurting their ■■■■■.*

I can’t do that. I can’t, so just shut up and die, Natsuki Subaru.

“—Nice, mister. Is that how you’re planning to go to the next one?”

I managed to hold it in. But I don’t have to stand for this.

In a situation where he couldn’t move an arm or leg, Subaru put all his remaining strength into a trembling arm and flipped the bird.

“Die in a fire.”

With that, his consciousness cut out—

Round 2

- The attempt to help Emilia and Ram finish Lye Batenkaitos quickly has failed.
- Subaru’s support is unhelpful against Lye’s martial arts mastery.
- Beatrice’s surprise attacks don’t work well against Gluttony.

5

Furious clouds of sand threatened to choke out everything.

Shaken by the violent tremors, Subaru was holding on for dear life, desperate not to get thrown off. Right in front of his eyes, braided hair swung left and right.

"Keep it up, my cute sandworm!"

Showing her true nature as a demon beast tamer, Meili ordered the slithering beast forward to confront the stampede.

On her orders, the massive sandworm that was dozens of feet tall charged the approaching horde of monsters. The monsters were momentarily forced back but were undeterred, trampling corpses as they continued their relentless pursuit. The stampede was unending.

"Phew… You're such a cruel taskmaster, mister…!"

She grumbled to Subaru, who had asked her to deal with the battle that showed no signs of stopping. Meili's eyes were bloodshot as she wiped the sweat from her brow.

With Subaru's Cor Leonis active, he could track the status of all his allies by the intensity of their light. He could see Meili was getting exhausted.

Her blessing allowed her to control demon beasts, but it couldn't be used indefinitely, and she would hit her limit eventually.

After he read her book and experienced her life through his eyes, Subaru knew what it cost her. That only made it painfully obvious that Meili was doing everything she could to clear the tower with them.

"Heeeey, mister! If you don't hold on tight, you'll die!"

"Yeah, I know! But I never expected to go for a demon beast ride myself!"

They were riding on the back of a giant sandworm, desperately clinging to protrusions on its back to avoid getting thrown off. Subaru was still deeply amazed by the bold strategy of fighting a swarm of demon beasts while riding one themselves.

The sight of the frenzied monsters made Meili sigh as she watched them get crushed by the sandworm.

"The beasties really do love you, mister."

"I can't say the feeling's mutu…ghh."

Subaru's eyes narrowed as he studied the swarm all around them. He didn't understand why, but one thing was clear—the swarm of monsters surrounding the tower were not interested in the tower at all. They were clearly after Subaru.

"Looks like it's safe to say the five obstacles pretty much all involve me."

First was the stampede of monsters. Then there was Gluttony, who was after Subaru's memories. And Shaula transforming before coming after Subaru. Plus the pitch-black shadow that swallowed the tower whole.

He wanted to lament his own powerlessness, but even more than that, the thought that they were all after him really did make him want to cry.

"Mei—"

Before he could finish, his voice was drowned out by white light raining down from above that blew away his words—along with the sandworm's massive torso.

"GHHHHHHHH"

The sandworm let out a death roar as more than three quarters of its almost thirty-three-foot length was erased.

A low, rumbling thunder rolled over them as the rest of the barrage landed all around them. Subaru and Meili were tossed from the shredded torso and into the air.

"Grrrh!!!"

Subaru reached out and pulled Meili's small body into his arms.

As he held her close, he saw it out of the corner of his eye—a giant scorpion sitting on the tower's outer wall.

"Shaula."

Her tail was pointed right at them, visible even in the darkening skies.

Subaru's blood ran cold as he realized time was up. Someone inside the tower had broken a rule. Accordingly, Shaula had lost control and transformed into a scorpion, and just like she'd warned, she attacked Subaru.

That blast had torn through the sandworm's torso and launched Subaru and Meili into the air—

"Gah. Ngh."

They were falling at high speed toward the sands.

Meili was locked tight in his arms and would probably be safe. But the same couldn't be said for Subaru. Unable to control his landing, he felt his head slam deep into the sand.

There was a dull thud, and a joint that really should not break went *snap*.

The next instant, the world went dark. It wasn't fully severed, but his spine was undoubtedly torn.

"Mister—"

Sound, touch, vision… Everything grew distant.

But his nose still worked. It was strange. Even though he never really expected much from his sense of smell, for some reason, his nose worked until the very end.

It was a sweet smell. The scent of what had been in his arms just moments ago.

She's probably not dead. I can still smell—

Round 7

- Escaping the tower with Meili and drawing out the demon beasts is effective.
- The demon beasts are after Subaru. Most likely the shadow and the scorpion are after him as well.
- Natsuki Subaru alone cannot protect Meili.

6

A fixed reset point for his Return by Death had its upsides and downsides.

For one thing, it was incredibly simple to test things by messing with the matchmaking. But even if Subaru activated Cor Leonis immediately upon waking to pinpoint where his comrades were, there was nothing he could do to stop a fight that had already begun.

Shaula was dealing with the stampede, and Emilia was fighting Lye Batenkaitos.

It went without saying that Shaula was on a timer, but he couldn't just abandon Emilia's group or Rem in the green room, so there was little he could do.

But that didn't mean he had zero options.

"…Agh, you're something. It's impressive for anyone to push me this far."

Standing on a frozen floor, Lye Batenkaitos rubbed his bloody forehead.

He was bleeding from a shallow cut on his face, and his left arm hung limply due to a broken shoulder. He looked worse than any run Subaru had seen so far.

And that made perfect sense.

"Much like your brother, you possess an impressive level of skill. However, you are outnumbered… You have no chance of victory."

Flourishing his knight's sword, Julius faced off against the bloodied Lye.

This wasn't the first time Subaru brought Julius to reinforce Emilia. However, there was a key difference from his last defeat.

"Are you well, Lady Emilia? That was dangerous. I am glad we were able to make it in time."

"Subaru, Julius. Thanks for coming. That *really* helped."

This time, they reached Emilia before Gluttony stole her name away. Thanks to that, Julius was able to coordinate precisely with Emilia, and they managed to successfully corner Lye. With Emilia, Julius, and Ram all in play, even Gluttony could see the writing on the wall. It wouldn't be long before he'd be ready to throw in the towel.

Lye was already on the verge of death, but Subaru knew that wouldn't be enough to get back the names and memories he had consumed. He wanted to capture the Archbishop alive, if possible. Ideally, they'd force him to surrender.

"If you spill the secret behind your power and immediately return everything you've devoured, we'll spare your life. Not a bad deal, right?"

"Heh. That's surprisingly lenient. You're right, it isn't bad. As far as we're concerned, it isn't a terrible proposal, but…"

"…But?"

"Do you really think we would go along so easily when you talk like you can see right through us?"

"—Ngh, wait!"

Lye stuck out his long tongue with a sneer. Subaru frowned and immediately deduced what Gluttony intended to do and cursed his own shallowness.

The others reacted to his shout, but it was too late.

"Buh-bye."

Waving casually, Lye used Leaping Dorkel's Teleportation ability and vanished.

"Watch out! He could still come at us from anywhere!"

"There's no point. Once they've decided to escape, he and his ilk simply flee as fast as they can. That's why he has never been caught before."

Julius was on guard for a surprise attack, but Ram's assessment was more coolheaded.

Subaru agreed with Ram. There was no reason at all for Lye to continue fighting in this situation. He was an Archbishop, not a warrior.

"…Just a little more, and we would've had him."

A murmur trickled out in the hall now devoid of enemies.

"One more step, and the one who hurt Rem would've been…ngh."

Ram was kneeling, her voice ragged. She pressed her fist against the floor, trembling with rage because they'd let Lye escape.

"Ram…"

Emilia leaned close to Ram, touching her slender shoulder. As he watched her console Ram, Subaru bit his lip.

"…Does that mean we managed to drive off Lye?"

They had forced Lye to retreat by fighting him three-on-one, but it was unclear whether he had completely fled the tower.

Of course, given his title of Gluttony, it was safe to assume he was more fixated on his prey than the average person. Wasn't it more dangerous to leave him loose in the tower?

"The problem is, devoting people to chase him down puts us right back where we started. But if we leave him alone, then—"

"You shouldn't bother worryin' about your opponents. You just gotta move without overthinkin' it."

"______"

Every hair on Subaru's body stood on end. Everyone in the passage turned around, seeing the red-haired man approach with the shuffle of sandals.

He had a ferocious, sharklike grin as he shamelessly appeared before them.

"Why should I have to care about other people when I'm takin' a stroll in my own damn backyard?"

Reid Astrea had descended to the fourth floor. Subaru knew that his appearance was a bad development. He had put Reid on the back burner to focus on dealing with Lye as fast as possible, but now Reid was moving about freely, and they had let Lye escape.

"Since when has this been your backyard?" asked Emilia.

"Oy, don't get the wrong idea, babe. When I say that, I don't mean this gloomy tower. The whole world's my backyard."

"…When I hear that coming from a person who became a legend with a single swing of his sword, I cannot bring myself to laugh even if it is a joke," Julius said.

Reid wasn't supposed to be able to leave the second floor, so Emilia and Julius were obviously on guard when they saw him appear without warning. And behind them, Ram slowly looked up, despite her current state.

"I thought you couldn't leave that floor. Why have you come down here, Examiner?"

"I ain't interested in talkin' to a girl so winded, she has to take a knee. If you want an answer, try askin' nicely. I don't hate strong-willed women. Don't hate weak-willed ones, either, though."

"I see. Churl."

Ram stood, scornfully replying to Reid's comment.

The three of them prepared to fight against an unavoidable enemy. Subaru had some hope that they might be able to challenge Reid if it was the three of them, just like they had overwhelmed Lye, but…

"Why did you come straight here…?"

"—Those eyes are the reason, obviously."

"______"

"Also, partly to spend time with that hottie, but your eyes are disgusting. I'm going to erase them."

Reid's blue eyes looked past the three standing around him, piercing Subaru.

The hostility he directed at Subaru now was identical to how he'd acted moments after fusing with Roy in other loops. The cause had to be the knowledge he'd gained from merging with Gluttony.

And his will was far more unyielding than the Archbishop of Gluttony's. There would be no changing his mind.

"I won't let you."

"Oh?"

Beatrice stood in front of Subaru, lips pursed.

"Hey, brat." Reid shrugged. "You don't have to go rushing to your death."

"Sorry, but I suppose I'm not interested in living like I'm dead anymore."

"Heh, you don't say. Guess that's how it's gotta be."

No great and worthy hero would raise a hand against a little girl. But the light in Reid's eye was unwavering, putting to rest any naive thoughts like that. It didn't matter who stood before him, child or not.

Emilia, Julius, Ram, and Beatrice. If they included Subaru and his cunning, then they had five people. Five against Reid.

Despite those odds, the terror filling Subaru refused to go away. Cloying sweat trickled down his back.

The others surely felt it, too. Their faces were tense as they steeled themselves for the impending fight.

Then—

"Ul Minya."

Countless purple missiles filled the passage, completely blocking Reid's escape.

Beatrice clearly had no intention of holding back. This spell was fatal if it so much as grazed its target, and even though Reid undoubtedly realized that in an instant, he simply grinned fearlessly.

"Beatrice, Natsuki Subaru's great spirit."

"Not bad. I'm Reid Astrea, the Stick Swinger."

The tension in the air was palpable as they announced themselves.

For a brief moment, all was still. Then purple bolts flew, signaling the start of a battle of utter devastation. Emilia and the others boldly leaped into the fray without hesitation.

"———"

Opening his eyes, Subaru gripped his whip and got ready to do everything he could.

I don't know what I can do. But I won't look away.

He refused to avert his eyes from the results of his choices.

He would face it head-on and—

Round 15

- Gluttony will run when obviously outmatched.
- If left alone, Reid will always come to kill Subaru in the end.
- Never let anyone else die before you again.

7

"—baru! Subaru! Get ahold of yourself!"

The moment of losing consciousness and waking up was like changing the channel on a TV.

Reeling from the sudden change, Subaru was slow to react as the girl peered into his soul with her unmistakable blue eyes.

"Bea…trice…"

"That's right. It's Betty. Say if you are still yourself."

She pressed him for an answer as she gripped his face between her hands. They were in the Taygeta archive on the third floor, and this was their seventeenth reunion…

"Subaru?"

"No, it's nothing. I remember. You're Beatrice; I'm Natsuki Subaru. We're partners, and I'll be counting on you more than ever. This is fine, dot jpeg."

"D-dot jpeg…?"

Subaru answered whimsically and flashed a thumbs-up. Beatrice was baffled, but she returned the gesture. Her simple acceptance of an expression that shouldn't exist in this world was proof of what a terrible influence Subaru was on her. As he patted her on the head, he quickly set his mind in motion.

There was no time to waste. He had to come up with a new plan and incorporate what he had learned during the fifteenth round that had just ended.

"…Calm down, Subaru." Beatrice tugged at his sleeve and peered at his face. "Talk. Explain what happened in the book. Could you see Reid's memories? And other than Betty, do you remember Emilia and everyone else, too? You have to remember all the important things. All of it."

"That's… Yeah, you're right."

Her earnest plea made him stop and think.

In his rush to solve everything, he was neglecting Beatrice, even though she was right there in front of him.

It's the classic development where the person going through the same loop over and over starts disassociating with everything around them.

"…I never thought I would ever end up in that sort of situation, though."

And in those sorts of stories, it was supposed to happen after facing a seemingly impossible wall dozens or hundreds or even thousands of times.

He had been at it a mere fifteen tries.

Is my ■■■■■ already so hardened that I can’t even see others as actual people?

“What am I, stupid? Okay, I admit I’m stupid.”

Subaru admonished himself, disgusted with his ■■■■■’s weakness. He couldn’t believe how fragile, how pathetic it could be.

You’ve only died fifteen times. All you’ve done is throw away your life without making any progress. What right do you have to talk about exhaustion?

Stand up. Raise your head. Clench your fists, Natsuki Subaru. There’s no one else but you.

The real Natsuki Subaru wouldn’t break from this.

“—You were never the sort of superman who could do anything.”

“———”

Just as he began to sink into a cycle of self-doubt, Beatrice’s voice freed his mind. Subaru felt his breath catch. Still looking at him right in the eye, she continued.

“I will say it as many times as you need to hear it. You aren’t some superman who can do anything, Subaru. You are always so busy dealing with whatever is in front of you, hurting yourself for the sake of everyone else… Even though you’re a normal boy who isn’t especially good at enduring pain.”

“Th-that shouldn’t be true. I don’t think. Or else…”

“Or else what?”

“Or else, how could I…?”

His voice was quivering as he clenched his chest. It was pounding like it might burst any moment. The fear he felt now made his ■■■■■ race worse than when he stood on the verge of death.

Beatrice shook her head, standing in his way.

“Subaru, stay here and just rest. Let Betty take care of things for you.”

“Wha…?! Don’t be stupid! I’m fine! Yeah, I’m a little off-balance, but…”

He tried to stand up and stop her, but…

“—Ah?”

“You’re trembling, Subaru.”

Dumbfounded, he looked down at his unsteady legs. Raising his knee, Subaru tried to muster some strength, but it was quickly apparent that his legs wouldn’t support him.

No matter what he did, he found it impossible to get up.

“Why…?”

“It’s obvious. You’ve been pushing yourself too hard this whole time.”

"No, wait, wait a minute! I can handle at least this much. This is…"

He hit his knees over and over in frustration, trying to forcibly drive some strength into his legs, but he still couldn't stand. Even though Subaru didn't feel any pain, suffering, or exhaustion, his limbs remained lifeless. And while he was doing that, Beatrice took a step away from him.

"Subaru, we'll cover wherever you are lacking. So don't try to do everything yourself. After all…"

"Beatrice…"

"That's Natsuki Subaru's style."

Smiling as Subaru's eyes widened in shock, Beatrice turned to the stairs. As she left, she talked to Echidna and Meili, who were patrolling the archive…

"You two go to the balcony. I'll find Emilia and Ram. They went to the green room. Be careful."

With those brisk instructions, the three of them set off.

Subaru was alone on the third floor. Julius would have normally come to the archive, but he wouldn't show up here once he ran into Beatrice.

Without Subaru's directions, they wouldn't be able to deal with all the issues assailing the tower. And because of their kindness, because of their concern for Subaru, they would die.

"Because of me… Because I'm weak… How did so little break me…?"

The real Natsuki Subaru wouldn't have been stopped by this.

A fire roared in Subaru's chest as he raged at his uselessness. But at the same time, he remembered the Natsuki Subaru Beatrice had just described. That was unacceptable. He refused to believe it. If what she said was true, then Natsuki Subaru was just a normal person.

"There must have been something. Something that changed you, Natsuki Subaru…"

Was there an absurd encounter? Did you receive an unbelievable power? Have an experience I can't even begin to imagine? You must have had something *that let you escape from being pathetic old Natsuki Subaru and helped you gain the trust of all these people in this new world…in this new life.*

"Natsuki Subaru was here…"

That was the phrase that had made him doubt this world's Natsuki Subaru. It had been carved into his own arm. Scrawled like a curse all over a room. The message from a being who should not have been there.

It almost felt like a hex from someone who had been robbed of their place and role.

“If you really are somewhere inside me…then show yourself…!”

Grabbing his arm, clenching hard enough make his bones creak, Subaru pleaded with himself—with the Natsuki Subaru who wasn’t there.

He demanded the reborn Natsuki Subaru come out. He wanted to see the Natsuki Subaru who could achieve what he couldn’t.

“It’s not enough! It won’t work with me! We need you, Natsuki Subaru!!!”

Swinging his arm down, Subaru punched the floor. It was made of some unknown material. The hard surface hurt his fist, but it was nothing compared to the feeling of powerlessness eating away at his ■■■■■.

I want to save them. I want to save everyone.

None of them are evil. I don’t want to hurt any of them, and they don’t want to hurt me. I know that. I don’t have to doubt who to save or who it’s okay to care about. But…

“Right now, we need you… So why is it me and not you? If it’s just my cowardly self, then everyone will… Why…?”

As of this very moment, I can’t even move my legs. And because of that, Beatrice, Echidna, Meili, Emilia, Ram, Julius, and Shaula—they’re all rushing to their deaths.

All because Subaru was powerless to save them from their fates.

“…Cor Leonis…”

Subaru murmured weakly as he activated his authority. He wanted to hurt himself. The new power dwelling inside him showed where his comrades were in the tower. And it would also show him their final moments, as well as the demise of the tower itself.

Everyone is doing their best, no matter where they are. They’re all following Beatrice’s instructions perfectly, I’m sure.

And as information flowed into Subaru, this loop pointlessly—

“—?”

Static interrupted that pessimistic stream of thought. Subaru slowly looked up. Turning around, he turned his eyes to a shelf filled with countless books of the dead.

“————”

A strange feeling struck him.

This wasn’t his first time activating Cor Leonis in the archive. He had done it every time he came back to track down his comrades.

He had ground his life down to a nub, chasing after any and every possible combination that would change the situation they were trapped in.

And yet he couldn’t understand how this was the first time he had picked up on this.

“This reaction has to be…”

It was faint, barely even perceptible, but he could feel it.

Compared to the feeling of his comrades, who he could sense clearly even at a distance, this signal was terribly weak…but it was unmistakable.

Forcing his trembling legs to move, he slowly crawled over. Once he reached the shelf, he forcibly lifted his upper body by leaning against it. Somehow, he managed to get to his feet. Then he reached toward that faint, fading light and grabbed it.

What his hand found was a single tome—a book of the dead. When he pulled it out…

"———"

…he stopped breathing.

The black cover featured nothing but a title. It was a simple, dull book. But it also held enormous meaning for Subaru.

Because…

"Natsuki Subaru."

—There was a book of the dead that should not have been there.

CHAPTER 2

SUBARU NATSUKI

1

His black eyes widened in disbelief as he felt his throat tighten.

He had discovered a deadly poison clearly meant for him that was harmless to everyone else.

Natsuki Subaru's book of the dead. This was a serious discovery.

"Why…?"

Why was there a book of the dead that should not exist?

The Taygeta archive in the Pleiades Watchtower was supposed to hold the books of people who were already dead. It made no sense to find the book of someone who was still alive.

And he couldn't pretend it belonged to someone who miraculously had the same name.

"It's written in Japanese…"

The title engraved on the black cover was unmistakably 菜月･昴. As far as he had seen, the writing in this world was like nothing he knew. If Emilia or the others saw this book, it would look like meaningless characters to them.

This book was a poison for Subaru and Subaru alone, but the opposite was also true. It contained a possibility only he could see.

But a possibility for what, and provided by whom?

The reason he found this book was because of Cor Leonis's faint reaction and because he had searched based on that. Without it, he would never have noticed.

It was a chance thing that was virtually impossible, barring the whims of a god.

"And if not a god, then…"

Someone was behind this. Subaru was sure of that.

The question was whether it was real. And if it was real, what would be recorded? Whose life would he experience?

"Was Natsuki Subaru considered dead the moment he lost his memories…? Does that make it a recording of all the times I died before…?"

According to what Louis said, the corridors of memory extracted recollections and experiences from the souls of the dead before recycling the souls. If those memories were what filled the books of the dead, then it wasn't hard to imagine how Subaru's deaths might be reflected in some form or another.

But in that case, returning by death is…

"What am I, stupid? Of course I'm stupid. And a coward…"

Subaru berated himself as he felt his thoughts scramble in a completely unexpected direction.

If he was being honest with himself, Subaru knew he was scared. What would happen if he read the 菜月・昴 book? He was terrified of that strange and unknown possibility. He was trying to put off testing his baseless hypothesis. To put off turning the pages.

"———"

It wasn't like he particularly believed the five-minute hypothesis, but discovering that a 菜月・昴 book of the dead existed was almost a relief. It was essentially proof that he had not, in fact, just popped into existence.

But at the same time, it also confirmed that another Natsuki Subaru really had lived in this world. And that he was wiping away the traces of that Subaru, overwriting him.

"…Where does this Natsuki Subaru's book even start, and where does it end?"

With Meili, it had begun with her earliest moments, when she first gained a mind and ■■■■■ and started forming proper memories. From there, it continued through her life up to her death.

But how would it go with Subaru?

It would probably start similarly, with the seeds of consciousness, like with Meili. But where would it end? The current Natsuki Subaru who had lost his memories was obviously not dead. So if the Subaru inside the 菜月・昴 book was considered dead, then the natural conclusion was that the contents would show everything right up until the moment he lost his memories.

The other possibility was that it would include the moments after he woke up in this tower, missing his memories. In that case, which death would be the endpoint?

Or was it blank, like Reid's, after his book was used to re-create him as an examiner for the tower?

What in the world would the 菜月・昴 book show…?

"So, what do you want to do, chicken?"

Do you want to see it or don't you?

Dismayed by the fact that he couldn't easily answer his own question, Subaru denounced his weak ■■■■■ and sighed. After coming this far, there was no way he could bear not to look. Even if it had occurred to him, he couldn’t imagine actually making that choice.

“———”

So, so, so, so, so…

Then, then, then, then, then…

“Ngh…”

He took a deep breath, then opened the book.

The path of 菜月·昴 that began who knows where and ended somewhere—

2

This is seriously bad.

Face against a hard floor, the burning from his stomach seared his brain.

He couldn’t muster any strength. He couldn’t feel his arms and legs. There was only the heat filling his whole body.

His mind desperately tried to understand what had happened, desperately pleading to do something.

It all twisted and blended and merged with a cry of pain.

But the thought that he had to do something was pointless.

—Hot, hot, hot, hot, hot, hot.

With a cough, the source of life spilled from his mouth. Bubbles of blood formed at the edge of his mouth. The world was fading, and the ground was turning a bright red.

—Wait, is this all my blood?

It felt like all the blood in his body had spilled out as he reached out a trembling hand, searching for the source of the heat searing his body. When his fingers reached the tear in his stomach, there was a moment of comprehension.

Of course it felt hot. He had mistaken pain for heat. A sharp cut tore through his torso so deeply that there was barely anything left to hold his body together.

Meaning I’m staring down one of those dead ends in life.

The moment he understood that, everything suddenly grew very distant.

In front of his eyes, a pair of black boots stepped onto a carpet of blood laid out on the floor, causing a ripple.

Someone was there. And it was probably his killer.

But he didn’t really try to look at their face. That didn’t matter.

He only prayed that she would be safe.

“—baru?”

He thought he heard a silvery voice. Just being able to hear that voice was more gratifying than anything. So—

“—gh!”

There was a short groan, and the red carpet welcomed someone else.

The body fell right beside him. And his lifeless, outstretched arm appeared as well.

The limp white hand and his bloodstained hand brushed against each other.

As their fingers touched, he thought he felt something squeeze his hand weakly.

"…wait…"

He wrestled with his fading consciousness, forcing himself to hold on and buy just a little more time.

"I swear…"

—I will save you.

The next instant, he—the current Natsuki Subaru, the old Natsuki Subaru, and 菜月・昴—died.

3

The moment the connection severed, Subaru felt a sharp pain in the back of his head.

"Th-this is…"

It wasn't some cold, dark, dirty building. He was in the Taygeta archive.

He had hit the back of his head when he slumped to the floor. Realizing that was the source of his pain, Subaru slowly sat up—and then checked his stomach in a panic.

There was a life-threatening injury—or at least there should have been.

"It's…gone. There's nothing. There's no cut…"

He checked his stomach over and over, confirming that the source of the searing heat was no longer there. There were no traces of the incredibly vivid scene he'd just lived through.

The overwhelming pain that he had mistaken for burning. That feeling was…

"…a memory. My stomach split open, and I died."

A sharp blade had bitten deep, and his final moments had been steeped in powerlessness and blood. It would still have been forgivable if he had at least died alone. But that wasn't the case.

"Satella…"

That was the name—the fake name—of the girl he had been unable to save.

In those memories, the familiar, silver-haired girl had interacted with Subaru under someone else's name. Why? It wasn't out of malice, that much was clear.

And as he watched the other Natsuki Subaru run around and work so hard right after being summoned to this world, something dawned on him.

That went beyond dying in vain. Calling it a dog's death would be an insult to dogs, but…

"—This is definitely the one and true Natsuki Subaru's book of the dead."

A pathetic, foolish, weak, hopeless Natsuki Subaru. There was no mistaking it.

That stupid self-consciousness and total lack of consideration for his parents was unmistakable. And on top of it all, when he found himself in another world, he used it as an excuse to escape reality, deceiving himself and the people around him with a hollow sense of positivity.

That foolishness had resulted in tragedy.

"What a hopeless idiot…but…"

His stupidity had been fatal, but it had also revealed certain truths. This may have come naturally to the other Natsuki Subaru, but it was something the current Natsuki Subaru had not known.

—For example, how had he gained the power of Return by Death?

If this was a classic *isekai* story, then there should have been a god or some other supernatural being that summoned him. But if the old Natsuki Subaru didn't have any memories of meeting a supernatural being, then it made sense why he didn't remember receiving the power or being aware it existed.

In his final moments, the other Natsuki Subaru had been convinced that he'd died for real.

Or at least that's how it felt to me.

—And as he had that thought, Subaru suddenly realized something.

I can't objectively differentiate between myself and the other Natsuki Subaru *in any meaningful way.*

"I'm even more mixed-up than when I read Meili's book…"

When he'd dived into her book of the dead and gone through the moments of her life, he had experienced something like an intense gravitational pull that dragged him into her mind. Part of his personality had merged with hers and created a Meili that took up residence in his head, saying whatever she wanted and generally driving him crazy.

On some level, he knew that it was a figment of his imagination and had nothing to do with the real Meili. Even then…

"———"

There were obvious differences between his experience with Meili and what he was going through now.

The primary reason was probably because the subject this time was himself. A version of him that wasn't actually him. This was an impossible situation that was pushing him into an unexpected battle with himself.

A battle with myself…

It was a hackneyed turn of phrase, but it perfectly described the situation Subaru found himself in. Honestly, it wasn't looking good. Subaru's consciousness was being inextricably drawn into the other Natsuki Subaru.

"—Emilia. Emilia, Emilia, Emilia, Emilia, Emilia."

Subaru could feel himself being blotted out, so he chanted her name like it was a powerful spell.

The reason for that was simple—the Natsuki Subaru in the book of the dead didn't know her as Emilia. He had played the fool until the very end, never doubting the fake name he had been given.

That was a difference between the current Subaru and his other self.

Still terrified by the feeling of being whittled away, he gritted his teeth and looked down at his feet. The book that he had dropped was lying there.

He had watched the old Natsuki Subaru die once.

It was odd to think back on it, as the book had started with the moment he first came to this world, the moment he had shouted like a moron about how the world was so different. With Meili's book, it had started with her first memories—not that it changed much.

The issue is what comes next.

"It was the same for you, right, Natsuki Subaru…?"

That Natsuki Subaru must have used the same Return by Death power, too. He must have been even better at using it than the current Subaru. Or maybe he didn't have to rely on the limited effects of Return by Death, and he could freely turn back time.

Honestly, that would make way more sense.

A power like that would go a long way to explaining why he was so trusted and relied upon by Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Echidna, Julius, Meili, Shaula, Patrasche, and all the other people he had met.

"In which case…the answer is somewhere past this moment…"

The current Natsuki Subaru and the other Natsuki Subaru looked exactly the same from the outside. But there had to be some decisive moment that changed the other Natsuki Subaru and made him *him* and no one else. In search of that moment, Subaru picked up the book again.

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath.

"———"

With the book in hand, he counted one, two beats of his

■■■■■. And when it had calmed down, he slowly started walking.

Finally, standing in front of the bookshelf, he stretched out a hand—

"—The second volume."

The next 菜月・昴 volume had faintly revealed itself to Cor Leonis.

4

This Natsuki Subaru's path was unsightly, haphazard, and unsalvageable.

"What a failure. An amateur through and through. Sloppy movements, too. No blessing, no techniques. I figured he had some knowledge to fall back on, but nope. Why did he even try?"

Tormented by a powerful enemy, the boy had been cut down without managing to mount any sort of real counterattack. And around him lay the bloody bodies of an old man and a blond girl. He had failed to save either of them. He couldn't so much as lift a finger.

"Slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly losing warmth, growing ever colder."

Finally, his stomach was cut open and his eyes were cut out. He wasn't long for this world, and he spent his dying moments blind and clinging to fear.

Right up until the end, he was cowering, trembling, terrified, pathetic…

"Hey, did you stab him?"

"What else was I supposed to do?! What if he ran away? It'd be a huge pain in the ass."

"Stop it, dumbass! Ah, this is no good. That's a deep cut. He's gonna die."

What an easygoing conversation to have over the body of someone who's collapsed.

If he didn't focus on such trivial thoughts, he would be forced to confront the pain of being stabbed in the back.

He was astounded from the bottom of his ■■■■■. How masterfully he avoided suffering and protected himself.

Truly, a pointless death. A dog's death, of no value to anyone.

A fitting ending, though. Why can't you just pour all of yourself into every second of your life? Whatever. This world is over. I already knew that.

I knew I would see death ever since I came here. So if there isn't anything decisive here, then this world is over. This one's done. Just move on to the next one. Move along. Next. Next, next, next. If you don't, the pain, the pain, the pain, the unbearable pain, there has to be something to *carry into the next one…*

Dying in your sleep. Such a simple end, but there was a venomous cruelty to it.

A death that you didn't even notice might seem easier than the deaths that were all tied up in pain and suffering.

But that would be wrong.

Why did he die? Did he even actually die?

There were probably a lot of people afraid of death who wanted to die in their sleep, but after experiencing it himself, Subaru wouldn't recommend it.

Because dying meant *dying*.

The end of a life, the final curtain needed to be a clear endpoint.

Panic and despair, shock and yearning. Experiencing all that, Subaru sought the next book of the dead. He had to know what happened next. He had to find out what killed him…

Mysteries invited more mysteries. He experienced incomprehensible and unreasonable deaths.

Countless endings, repeated tragedies.

They came for his life, to kill him, to break him, and ultimately, to betray him.

Why? It stopped making sense.

Why did he have to save the blue-haired girl who killed him?

Why was he so desperate to save her? Why had she given him that push when his knees gave out and his will was broken?

Why did hearing her words give him the strength to carry on?

A wish lay beyond that betrayal.

Hope that it wasn't a true betrayal. Hope for a world where that was true.

The hollow, sad misunderstanding that Natsuki Subaru could save anyone. Sacrificing his life on the altar of that misunderstanding, he forced the books open.

Meeting Emilia, meeting Puck, meeting Felt, meeting Old Man Rom, meeting Reinhard, meeting Elsa, meeting Beatrice, meeting Ram, meeting Rem, meeting Roswaal, meeting Petra, meeting the people of Earlham Village…

…and desperately denying the muddy torrent edging ever closer.

5

"Ugh…bgh…"

Holding his mouth after facing another onslaught of death, Subaru knelt on the floor in the Taygeta archives. Unable to stay upright, he slumped forward onto the ground.

"Haaah, haaah…"

His breathing was ragged, and a hideous cold sweat drenched his body. Was it hot, or was it cold? Was it bitter? Sweet? Painful? Pleasant? All his emotions blended together as black became white and he couldn't tell up from down anymore.

"That's…book eight…"

That was how many volumes he had gone through since finding the first 菜月・昴 book of the dead.

He was retracing that Natsuki Subaru's footsteps without skipping any deaths.

And as he relived all those memories, a thought came to him.

How simple, straightforward, and unbearably naive was Natsuki Subaru?

The latest death he saw at the end of the eighth volume was the main reason.

Natsuki Subaru had gotten into a fight with Emilia after the start of the royal selection was announced, scarred her ■■■■■ as much as he could, and then without apologizing or reflecting on what he did, died in a panic.

As he watched it all unfold, there was a part of him that couldn't help wondering why she simply didn't understand. And there was another part of him that wondered why he found it so unbelievable and agonized over it so much.

"Don't dwell on the past…"

The tragedy he had seen with his own eyes moments ago was so painful, he could've sworn it would rend his body in two. But those experiences were not real. It was just something that happened in the past. An old wound.

Forget it. Don't dwell on it. Or your ■■■■■ will break.

What am I going to do if that happens and I can't get back up again?

Natsuki Subaru isn't here, so I have to do something about it myself.

"I still…"

…haven't found it.

There has to be something decisive, something that only the true Natsuki Subaru has.

That would be the key to telling the difference between *this* and *that* Natsuki Subaru. And until he found it, his journey through the books of the dead wouldn't end. His search would continue until he discovered the key that would allow him to emerge as the real Natsuki Subaru.

Sadly, there were no signs of it anywhere. In all the memories he had gone through so far, the Natsuki Subaru he followed didn’t show even the first traces of a backbone, nor did he have the guts to try saving someone, let alone to become someone’s hero or savior.

What he did have was a stubborn refusal to give up and the fortune of being surrounded by good people. But that couldn’t be it. There had to be more. A clear, obvious, easy-to-tell *something*. A universal key that anyone could understand.

There had to be…

“Book nine…”

He braced himself to face the panic and chaos, the betrayal and despair, and the ever present swirling cycle of death.

I’m begging you, Natsuki Subaru. Hurry up and show me what makes you, you.

Before my ■■■■■ gives out following your footsteps, your wounds, your deaths.

6

The deaths kept piling up.

The endings continued.

Subaru could hear his ■■■■■ cracking a little more with each agonizing wound, with each devastating loss.

While letting out cries of incomprehension, he gritted his teeth in frustration when the miserable end came, then stood up again, pressing forward despite being covered in wounds and coughing up blood.

The struggles of a tearful, earnest boy were plain to see.

If not the first time, then the second. If not the second, then the third. If not the third, then the fourth. With every checkmate, he tasted death again. Even so, he held on, determined to break free and forge ahead.

It was inspiring. A feat worthy of respect.

Not giving up in these circumstances was nothing short of admirable. To grit his teeth and fight on, after everything he had gone through…it was incredible.

I have to admit, it’s impressive. I’m definitely seeing you in a new light.

…But this couldn’t be it. There had to be something else. There just had to be.

“Something…”

Anything…

It just doesn’t make sense otherwise.

He still hadn’t found what transformed the powerless, irredeemable Natsuki Subaru into the Natsuki Subaru who could save

Emilia and everyone else. That was why he was still searching so desperately, so frantically. Every time he opened a book of the dead, he was at the mercy of every abrupt transition, experiencing every bit of shock and terror the other Natsuki Subaru had felt. Braving the excruciating agony of death, he searched with increasing desperation.

But he couldn't find a single clue…

"Uwaaaaaaah!!!"

He slammed his head against the floor.

It had been fine while he was watching it. But the moment he came back, shame gripped his ■■■■■.

"Dad… Mom…"

There was a Natsuki Subaru who spoke to his parents and apologized to them. That Natsuki Subaru said his farewells to them without a care. He said he loved them for his own satisfaction, despite knowing how much his disappearance would hurt them…

"Uh…bgh…aaaaaa."

He threw up. And he wept.

What was so painful, so distressful, was that he understood Natsuki Subaru's feelings painfully well, and he also knew that his parents would forgive him.

Don't forgive me. Curse me. It would have been easier if they just yelled at me for being a terrible son.

But they didn't.

His father and mother didn't do what he expected. For his own sake, he wanted them to treat him like a failure of a son. But they would never do such a thing.

Subaru's father, Kenichi, and his mother, Nahoko, were the best parents.

A part of him was unbelievably happy. A part of him completely agreed with Natsuki Subaru's decision. And there was a part of him who wanted to be saved, even though he had no right. It was tying his ■■■■■ into knots.

Is this it? Is this the crux of it all? Is this how you became the best Natsuki Subaru could be?

"No…no, it can't be! No! This isn't right!"

Scratching his head, he slammed his fist into his aching forehead and berated himself.

Psychological relief wasn't what he'd been looking for. It had to be something clearer, something with some real power. A special key. An ability.

Some great power that only Natsuki Subaru knew about.

Something that Natsuki Subaru alone had awakened, like how Subaru developed his Cor Leonis ability. There had to be a special *something*, and he had to find it.

That was why Natsuki Subaru confronted death again.

“Tell me, Natsuki Subaru! What makes you special?! How can you be the only special one?! There has to be a reason! Something that changed you! Something that made you different! That made you not some useless dumbass! Change *me*! I don’t want to be this useless, pathetic, weak, shitty little person anymore! I’m tired of it! I don’t want to see everyone suffer anymore! There must be something, right?! It doesn’t make any sense… There has to be… You’re different from me… Because if you’re not…”

…Then there isn’t anything to do but…give up.

“If you’re just as weak and lousy as me and don’t have any power…”

After he’d been pushed to the brink so many times, someone was always there to give him a push. He wanted to return the favor, to repay the people who were so good to him.

“I’m begging you, Natsuki Subaru, please. Please, stop this…”

—It would have been so much simpler if you were a superman.

—If you only looked *like me but were totally different on the inside and had nothing in common with my weak body and ■■■■■.*

—That would have made it so much easier to understand why you can do things I never could…

But…

He tore books off the shelves and rushed headfirst into more deaths, wearing down his ■■■■■ with each one. His dogged determination was undeniable, but he was burning at both ends.

Even so, he pushed on, refusing to give up hope on finding what he was searching for…

Subaru opened the next book.

He braced himself. It might scramble his brain, or crush his ■■■■■, or defile his soul. But he couldn’t stop now. Losing that last thread of hope would be worse than any amount of suffering.

“You understand, don’t you…Natsuki Subaru?”

He spoke to someone who wasn’t there, looking for agreement. His voice sounded lifeless, but that was to be expected. The person he addressed didn’t merit excitement. The guy wasn’t all that.

With a forlorn hope that none of that was true and that he would finally be able to put an end to this, he pulled out yet another book of the dead.

Then—

“—Yeah, I get exactly what you mean.”

It was a bright, white space.

A quick glance confirmed Subaru wasn’t in the archive, nor was he a bodiless entity slipping into more memories. No, this was a different place but one that he recognized.

This is…

“I get you, Natsuki Subaru.”

“———”

“I mean, of course I do. You’re me.”

Standing there in that all-white world was Natsuki Subaru, waiting with those intimidating eyes he knew so well.

7

Short black hair, long torso, stumpy legs—and suspicious eyes that made him look like a murderer. An all-too-familiar face stared down at Natsuki Subaru, who had crumpled to the white floor.

“Let’s take it from the top. What’s up, bro?”

“———”

“Hmm, that’s a little confusing. If we wanted to be more precise, then… What’s up, other me?”

In a daze, he looked up and stared at his face.

The person raising his hand and greeting him so casually—no, that made it sound like someone totally different was there. Even though they had the exact same face.

"*Natsuki Subaru…*"

"…Am I detecting a weird kind of emphasis in there? Also, referring to yourself by your own full name is kinda weird. I guess it's common enough in manga and stuff. Anyway, it is a bit of a question what we should call each other."

"*Natsuki Subaru…!*"

Getting angry at the Subaru who was standing there so carefree, Subaru stood up. And glaring at the thoughtless person right in front of him, he gnashed his teeth.

"Why are you here…and where is this place? Why am I here?!"

Still staring at the nonchalant Subaru, he gestured to the white space all around them.

The white, empty space, just like the corridors of memory, the cradle of Odo Ragna, where he had faced off against Louis Arneb.

"Why am I here?!"

"—It's proof that you caught up to me."

"———"

"You read the books of the dead and caught up to me. You should have seen everything you didn't know. Every bit of my life in another world."

Subaru answered his hoarse shout calmly. Everything from his calm demeanor to his composed attitude to his seemingly insightful way of talking, it all bothered him.

—First of all, what is he saying with that nasty face?

"I caught up to you?"

"That's right. There isn't anything else about me that you don't know. So…"

"—Bullshit!"

"———"

"I caught up to you? You think this is a game?! Don't lie to me! There's still more! I still don't know the most important, the most crucial thing!"

Growling with a furious look in his eyes, Subaru grabbed Subaru by the chest. Subaru didn't resist. He let himself be pulled close until they were close enough to feel each other's breath as the other Subaru's wild black eyes stared him down.

"Perfect! If you're here, then just tell me! Why are you the way you are?! I didn't see anything! I couldn't find anything! Tell me…"

"The reason I'm me?"

"That's right! There must have been something, some spark that made you different. I want to…"

"—You should have seen it already, though?"

So close their eyes reflected in each other's, Subaru calmly looked at Subaru without resisting.

That lack of resistance made Subaru feel like he was being told he wasn't even worth talking to. Like he was being looked down upon from some high-up vantage point…

"Don't look at me like that!"

"Gah!"

Subaru slammed his fist into the face he couldn't bear to look at anymore. There was a hard impact, and the other Subaru got knocked back. And nothing happened to the Subaru who had thrown the punch.

The pain the other Subaru felt was his own.

He was clearly his own being, separate from Natsuki Subaru.

"The way you keep talking like you know everything…I see, I get it."

Subaru studied the Subaru who was kneeling after taking that punch and he finally understood something.

If this was the corridors of memory, then there was only one possible person behind this unnatural situation.

"So you're Louis? The Archbishop of Gluttony! Again?!"

When he had met her in this white realm the last time, she had used every trick in the book to separate Subaru from the identity of Natsuki Subaru, to devour his being completely.

He had just barely escaped her evil clutches, but there was no Archbishop who would give up so easily. Petelgeuse, Regulus, Sirius, Capella—they were all the worst possible broken people. Lye, Roy, and Louis were no different. It wouldn't be a surprise for her to lie in wait here for Subaru as he passed bullheadedly through all those books of the dead.

"That's what this really is, isn't it, Louis Arneb?! You can change what you look like, so you're just trying to mess with my head!"

Using the memories and names she stole from others, stealing not just their experience but even their form, she assimilated their identities and made them her own. That was Louis Arneb's power, her authority.

There was nothing strange about her wielding the menace she had used inside the tower here.

"You want to devour me? To hijack me for real this time? I already dumped your ass last time. Don't you know when to give up…? Do you really want to die and come back that bad?!"

"———"

"Snap out of it already! You think this is some amazing power?! It's just dying and getting another shot. Dying, retrying…and even then, the outcome is always shit, since the guy using it, *me*, is shit! That's why…"

“———”

“That’s why I couldn’t save anyone… That’s why everyone dies. Because I’m weak, everyone gets hurt. Right now, and however many times I repeat it, it feels like I can’t save anyone…”

—Return by Death isn’t worth anything.

It really is a shitty, useless ability. It would be better not to need something like this.

There was a Witch who said it was some wonderful thing, but I can’t agree.

Even if you give an ant a cannon, it still won’t be able to use it. It’s pointless.

How many times do I have to be tricked? To have my hope shattered? How many more times does my ■■■■■ *need to break before I’ll learn?*

Why do I keep standing up even after being tricked, see my hope shattered, and have my ■■■■■ *broken time after time after time?*

I’ll show you a fate that makes you want to tear your eyes away from the insanity of it all.

So why…?

“—Because you love everyone,” Subaru said to him, still kneeling.

Those quiet words pierced Subaru’s ■■■■■.

“…Because you love everyone. That’s why you can’t stop.”

Rubbing the red spot on his cheek where he was punched, Subaru said it again. The boy who had the same clothes, the same face, the same name, and yet somehow seemed decisively different, looked directly into Natsuki Subaru’s eyes as he continued.

“Honestly, just imagining how painful the situation you are in is enough to make me sick. Starting at the sixth stage at level one with no pickups. I hear you on all those complaints. It’s the same pain I’ve felt so many times before.”

His face was etched by the countless experiences of powerlessness and ignorance— Subaru could tell because he had lived through them as well.

Subaru knew all the defeats, all the pain, all the cries of death that the other Subaru had experienced. He had seen them with his own eyes. He had experienced them all with his own body, his own ■■■■■.

And precisely because he had experienced them, because he knew that none of it was a lie, he refused to accept what the Subaru in front of him was saying. He didn’t want to accept it.

“If I was stronger, if I was smarter, if I was more everything… It’s enough to drive you crazy, right?”

“…As if you’d understand! What do you know?”

“I know. And you should know why I know.”

“Grrr.”

There was no force behind his rebuttal. That was only natural, because that would entail rejecting someone's opinion, to brush it aside or crush it and declare they were wrong.

But Subaru couldn't muster that in response. Because he knew. In every sense, he knew everything there was to know about Natsuki Subaru.

"I shouldn't have looked at your memories…"

"You don't get to complain about that after poking around in someone else's diary."

"I should never have looked at your memories!"

Clenching his fists, Subaru railed against Subaru's cheeky quip.

But that was all the resistance he could muster.

"I…I wanted to find some hope. If you were some amazing guy, and I could just figure out what made you so amazing, then maybe I could do the same thing. But…"

But he knew. He had seen it all.

The Natsuki Subaru standing over there was no different from him at all. He was just a weak nobody. Just a mediocre guy who had lived a life that Subaru didn't know before, who had met people Subaru didn't know before, who had made it through stories Subaru didn't know before, who had experienced moments Subaru didn't know before.

"—I wish I could say you're wrong. But I can't. Because I know exactly how you feel—since you are me."

He had seen the world the other Natsuki Subaru had seen and experienced. He had seen it all. How Natsuki Subaru had come to love this world, the people in it, Emilia and everyone. And he had seen all the wounds Natsuki Subaru had suffered to be able to keep loving it all.

—Natsuki Subaru wasn't some superman. That illusion had already been shattered.

"Yeah, I know! I knew it! You…you just can't give up, no matter how many times you die. That's all it is!!!"

The Subaru standing across from him had slammed into impossible walls over and over, just like him. And when it happened, he died over and over and over again, changing the situation, the way the encounters happened, the way things connected, until he was able to make it through—that was all.

"The only reason you never give up is because you love everyone! You piece of shit! Why aren't you a superman?! Why are you still just a stupid kid?!"

He took as long as he had to, even if it meant enduring unspeakable agony. That was all.

Natsuki Subaru was just a regular person. He didn't have any extra tricks up his sleeve beyond what the current Subaru had. And he was terrible at playing the cards he did have. On top of it all, he had terrible, terrible luck.

"If there was at least something…"

He murmured weakly, having lost all steam. He clenched his fist, wishing for something even though he knew it was impossible.

"…Why did you disappear?"

"Huh?"

"Why were you gone? Do you know how much I've suffered because you up and vanished…?"

The unsolvable question that had started all of this.

Why had the original Natsuki Subaru disappeared? Why was the current Natsuki Subaru born?

What happened to the original Natsuki Subaru when his memories vanished like smoke?

"Why did you disappear…?"

"…That was me screwing up. I went into Taygeta to search for a solution to Reid. And luckily, I managed to find his book, but…"

"…Reid's book was empty when you read it."

"I bumped into Gluttony there. The rest you already know."

Subaru scratched his head as he recalled his embarrassing mistake.

Running into Louis in the corridors of time, the original Natsuki Subaru had his memories stolen. And forgetting all his adventurers in this new world up to that point, the current Natsuki Subaru, who couldn't understand his own feelings, let alone those of the people around him, was born.

"Don't beat yourself up too hard…is what I'd like to say, but I know that won't help you feel much better. Since you are me."

"…Natsuki Subaru is a weak nobody and an unsalvageable dumbass."

"Got that right."

"But…"

The other Subaru started to laugh as he agreed, but that last word made him raise his eyebrows.

Subaru gave his other self a good long look before he finally finished his thought.

"—You're an amazing guy, Natsuki Subaru."

That was how he honestly felt after witnessing more than twenty cycles of returning by death.

8

"———"

As he stared at the person standing right in front of him, his eyes slowly narrowed.

He was tired of looking at that familiar face because it was his own ugly face staring back at him. It was him, but it wasn’t him. It was him, even if it didn’t feel like him.

When he finally got a reaction out of him, it felt good. This was the first time something had actually gotten through.

“…The most familiar stranger, huh?”

There were not many people who could like themselves from the bottom of their ■■■■■.

Subaru hated himself in that sense. And Natsuki Subaru was probably no different. The new Subaru and the old Subaru both hated themselves.

But from the position of the most familiar stranger, when the current Natsuki Subaru looked at the other Natsuki Subaru, even if it was embarrassing, his first thought was *he’s cool.*

“Weak, pathetic, can’t do anything. But even so, you keep struggling. I respect that. That’s the you they all care about. So…”

“———”

“That was the whole point of reading your book of the dead.”

It wasn’t just to complain in the mirror about his own powerlessness and regrets.

And it wasn’t to trace the roots of the superman Natsuki Subaru and fulfill some delusion of unlimited power, either.

It was to understand that Natsuki Subaru was just a person. To accept that, and to respect it.

“…What was that, all of a sudden? You’re embarrassing me, man.”

The other Subaru had been frozen, listening intently. Suddenly he was moving and talking again. His eyes narrowed, and he glared at Subaru in annoyance—or perhaps in embarrassment.

“It’s a bit weird for me to say this, but looking back on everything up to this, I’m amazed you could say that. You basically watched ‘Natsuki Subaru Starting Life in Another World from Zero.’”

“Yeah, it feels a bit weird seeing a protagonist with the same name as me.”

“Better than the heroine having the same name as your mom… What am I even talking about?”

Firing off a bit of banter, both Subarus eyed each other. Seeming almost a bit let down, the other Subaru pointed to himself.

“So you’re going to believe me even after everything you said earlier? It’s not like you’ve ruled out me being Louis in disguise yet.”

“I have. You didn’t change back when I punched you.”

“That logic is straight out of a manga and isn’t necessarily true, you know…”

Like the other Subaru was saying, that wasn't really enough to be sure. But at this point, Subaru had let go of all his doubts. Probably because of what the other Subaru had said before.

Even if Louis Arneb could consume all of someone else's life from head to toe, that look on his face, the sound of his voice when he talked about how much he cared about everyone—that was something Subaru didn't believe she could reproduce.

Because she couldn't understand happiness. She didn't know what it meant to be fortunate or blessed…

"She can't love anyone, so she can't understand the feelings of someone who returns through death for people they care about."

"———"

"So why are you here? Were you waiting for me?"

He acknowledged the Subaru in front of him. This was someone with the same roots as him. The question that naturally rose to the surface then was why the two of them had met here.

Stepping forward on the pure white floor, the other Subaru answered:

"The reason we met here is because this is the one and only connection we have."

"Our connection…"

"Inside the tower, the only place you and me can meet is in the book of the dead that recorded the death where I had my memories eaten. That's the only way for a Subaru with memories and a Subaru without them to come face-to-face."

"…That just brings me back to the first question. Why are *you* here?"

He couldn't accept that it was just the book of the dead with 菜月・昴 written on it bringing the two of them together.

For that matter, it didn't make a ton of sense for there to be a pile of books for every single death. If Natsuki Subaru's death wasn't observed and recorded from some point beyond this world, it shouldn't even be possible.

Had the Odo Ragna itself acted as an observer?

"In that case, it doesn't make sense why Louis got so excited in the corridors of memory when she confirmed I was returning through death. If it could be confirmed from the outside…"

"She's just sitting in here. She isn't the ruler or anything. The ruler is…probably someone even more nasty. Given everything, the most likely candidate is…"

Both Subarus finished the thought together.

""Sage Flugel.""

That was the most likely and nastiest possibility.

The person who was involved with the construction of the

Pleiades Watchtower, who set the examination that forced them to face Reid, and who had sentenced Shaula to four hundred years of isolation that could have easily lasted even longer.

After both confirmed that he was a shared enemy, the two of them looked at each other.

Then, for the third time, he asked.

“Hey, other me. Why are you here?”

“———”

“So you’re not gonna say *you already know* this time, huh?”

He shrugged when the other Subaru fell silent. His banter went unanswered.

Instead, what appeared in the other Subaru’s black eyes was the gleam that had been there from the start.

He probably feels a bit guilty…

“Hey, what do you think will happen when our memories get combined?”

So Subaru deliberately brought it up in a cheerful tone.

9

“Are there any rules or anything for what happens in these sorts of stories?”

“I dunno. There isn’t really a set answer, I think.”

“Honestly, you probably have more experience in this place, so do you know any special rules I don’t?”

“You read my anatomy report, didn’t you? It’s fifty-fifty.”

“Fifty-fifty, huh?”

“Fifty-fifty.”

“…What if we’re like matter and antimatter and we annihilate each other?”

“Don’t say that. Win or lose, no hard feelings, yeah?”

“No, I’m definitely gonna have hard feelings. And if I would, that means you would, too.”

“Well, yeah. Probably. Yeah, not a lot of room in my ■■■■■.”

“What was that?”

“Not a lot of room in my ■■■■■… Huh? Did I say something weird?”

“…No, probably just me mishearing.”

“———”

“———”

“Ah, right. Just in case, since you never know, there are a couple things I want to say. You mind?”

“We’ve already come this far, so might as well.”

“You know more about the basics of this world…though that advantage is gone, now that I've read the books of the dead. But something else changed, too, right?"

"Changed?"

"After losing our memories, I talked with everyone, got to know them…a volume of 'Natsuki Subaru Starting Life in Another World from Zero' that you haven't seen."

"______"

"First of all, Meili. She's a bit of a land mine, but you can understand her if you talk to her, so make sure you do that. I'm definitely a big fan of Captain Meili right now."

"All right, got it."

"Also, there's a giant scorpion roaming around the tower, but that's actually Shaula. She's pretty damn dangerous, but…it's not because she wanted to be that way. Save her, too."

"All right, got it."

"Oh, right, and I forgot to say, but when I met Louis, Rem gave me a kick in the ass. I didn't remember her at the time, so it wasn't until reading the books that I realized what kind of girl she was…but yeah, that's definitely my Rem."

"No, she's my Rem."

"No, mine."

"Mine."

"______"

"______"

"Ram said there are things you can only see when the snowmelt finally comes… She really nailed it."

"Yeah, that's right."

"As for Julius…well, I don't really have to say anything there. He's not so unreliable that he needs someone like us to say something to him."

"Yeah, agreed."

"Thanks for apologizing to Mom and Dad."

"Yeah."

"Thanks for helping Otto and Garfiel."

"Yeah."

"Thanks for helping Petra and Frederica and everyone in Earlham, too."

"Yeah."

"Thanks for bringing Beatrice out and for taking her hand."

"______"

"And Emilia…"

"______"

"Thanks for falling for Emilia. I like her, too. I really do."

"…Yeah, I understand."

"——Natsuki Subaru, you're an incredible guy. I really do understand that, so I'm sure if it's you, it'll be fine."

"Yeah."

"———"

"Yeah… Right."

"———"

"Yeah. If it's us…it'll be fine."

10

"Fine, huh?"

"That's right. It'll be fine."

"Because I know you're really something."

"…True, yeah. There is one thing I need to tell you."

"———"

"Summer holiday's over now."

11

They put their hands together. That clichéd exchange was the last.

"———"

He breathed in…and out.

Most likely, the merger happened in an irregular way— *No, this place wasn't made to accommodate this sort of thing to begin with.*

Subaru's very existence, this very situation was itself an error.

So…

"———"

Subaru finally noticed the teardrop that rolled down his cheek and dripped from his chin. He just didn't feel the urge to wipe it away, because it didn't feel like his own tears. This came from someone else who was slowly merging into Subaru.

As he breathed deeply in and out, he scanned his mind. And what was seared into his memories was…

"Ngh!"

Suddenly, Natsuki Subaru flashed back to twenty-two deaths.

They were all deaths experienced in this tower, struggling against an unfair fate—the question mark, the part that had been unsure if it would make the merge, had connected.

It connected, but…

"You had your own crazy tightrope to walk…"

The other him who had praised him so much had endured such a lonely struggle. He finally realized how hard the other him had fought in such a difficult situation once he started believing in his friends.

Yeah, you're right…I really do respect you, Subaru.

Breathing deeply to calm the pounding in his chest, he nodded.

And then Subaru raised his head and looked forward.

The white space was unchanged.

Blank space in the corridors of memory created by the irregular situation.

In the location where, just moments ago, a second Subaru had been touching his hands. Looking down at the small figure sitting there, Subaru's eyes narrowed.

And…

"So, did you see what you wanted to see, Louis Arneb?"

Subaru quietly asked the Natsuki Subaru who had reached him after reading through all those books of the dead and then vanished—or rather, he asked Louis Arneb.

CHAPTER 3

LOUIS ARNEB

1

We want to be happy.

Whether a life was good or bad was determined by a massive roll of the dice in the form of where and how you were born. That was Louis Arneb's theory after having devoured and pored over the lives of countless people.

Louis was the youngest sister of the three siblings who bore the title of Archbishop of Gluttony.

Reports of the activities, scale, and organization of the Witch Cult were already sketchy and unreliable, but the Archbishops were particularly shrouded in mystery.

The most well-known Archbishops—in the past tense—were Sloth and Greed. Beyond them, it was known that Wrath, Lust, and Gluttony existed, too, but their identities had long been enigmas. And Louis Arneb, the youngest sister of the Gluttony siblings, was the best-kept secret of them all.

"Not because we especially wanted it that way, though," Louis muttered to herself in the blank white space she had inhabited since she was born.

Due to her circumstances, she couldn't leave this place and couldn't contact anyone. She couldn't wield the authority of Gluttony except in the most limited of situations, either, so her abilities didn't do her much good.

The one silver lining was that she never lacked for *meals*, thanks to her brothers' leftovers. The plates they brought her were brimming with individuality. Lye, the gourmet, loved a life seasoned with the richest of spices, be they good or bad. Roy, who ate any garbage he found, prioritized quantity above all else, dreaming of filling his stomach with whatever odd flavors he could find. Louis snacked on the meals her brothers brought her while developing her own school of thought.

Having digested so many lives, comparing all the flavors, testing so many, and dwelling on the idea for so long, there was something she realized— There was a quantifiable level of fortune in everyone's life.

"That person was happy, but this one was even more happy. And there are lots and lots of unhappy people… How can they all live so haphazardly and lazily?"

Louis sorted, compared, and graded their lives by her standards. Wealth differences, love, the environment they were born into, friends and family, if they had a lover. Grading by every sort of metric, she assigned points to people's lives one after the other, ranking them.

Looking through them all, she had another thought—

Why are they all so bad at life?

"If they just let us do it, we could do so, so much better. They're all so hapless."

Put another way, what she was doing was the equivalent of watching someone's life, like a game being played on a screen, pointing out places where they could do better or how this or that choice wasn't meta.

But she soon grew bored of making self-indulgent reviews. Obviously, all she could do was evaluate memories. There was no way for her to correct the play of someone else's game in progress.

Watching someone play a game they were terrible at forever on end wasn't just boring. It was torture. Even though they had the chance to walk on their own two legs in life, even though they had arms that could brush aside hardship, even though they had a head to envision a future. Everyone, even her brothers, were all scrubs.

"Pathetic, pathetic, pathetic. If you're going to live so pointlessly, then give that life to us. We could live it so, so, so much better. Every last one of you are all too incompetent."

Scorn-worthy lives lined her plate one after the other.

Digesting countless numbers of them, she grew sick from the rage and frustration.

"Ah, you look like you are eating with such gusto, dear brother."

"Ah, you look so pleased eating, brother dearest."

"Ah, meanwhile…we just want to vomit."

That was the reason Louis Arneb was called the gorger.

A ravenous hunger that couldn't be satisfied, no matter how much she ate.

Because it wasn't her body but her ■■■■■ that was starving.

—We want to be happy.

—We want to be happy. We want to be happy. We want to be happy.

Her brothers were living their own lives. They didn't have to wish for that.

But Louis alone had her life stolen from her. So she couldn't help but wish for it.

"We want to be happy."

In a white world, plowing through countless memories, that was her only wish.

That was Louis Arneb's one true wish—maybe anyone's one true wish.

"We want to be happy."

She couldn't be satisfied with borrowed life, snacking from other people's plates. It was boring. She was bored.

She wanted a life all her own, just for her. She wanted a body, a soul, a fate.

"We want to be happy."

Louis was unhappy.

The start of Louis's unhappiness was that she didn't have her own life to live.

"We want to be happy."

But at the same time, she understood herself completely.

Easily bored and quick to give up, even if she happened to suddenly get her hands on a life, there was no way she would be satisfied with it. Because she understood.

There were countless lives in this world, but there was an unbridgeable difference in the absolute amount of fortune, and that was decided by the completely random gamble of birth.

Louis didn't want to be inferior. She wanted to be blessed. She didn't want to be looked down upon.

—*We want to be happy.*

—*We want to be happy. We want to be happy. We want to be happy.*

—*We want to be happy. We want to be happy. We want to be happy. We want to be happy. We want to be happy. We want to be happy.*

She had ranked other people's lives. But whatever their score, wherever they ranked on her tier list, there were no lives that received perfect marks. And even a life that could earn top marks wouldn't be satisfying at all for her.

"Ah, we want to be happy."

There was a way. Gluttony's authority, Eclipse, made it possible. Gluttony's power stole other people's names and memories. Eclipse was a power that used those stolen goods to re-create a person—with that, Louis Arneb could begin her life.

No one could control how they were born.

She was sure that was the root of everyone's unhappiness. But Louis was different.

Louis had the right and the power to choose her birth, to choose her life. By stealing others' memories and re-creating them using Eclipse, she could make them her own.

She could choose her life—and make every correct choice.

A happy family, kind parents, an affluent lifestyle, a blessed environment, good friends, and a soulmate. They were all nothing more than the same sort of happiness she had seen elsewhere.

That wasn't what she wanted. She was searching for the ultimate life.

Louis Arneb hungered for the ultimate life. That was what she sought.

So when she learned about Natsuki Subaru, she was ecstatic.

Hearing a voice she should not have been able to hear:

"—What did you just do to me, Louis Arneb?"

"Eh…?"

She faced Natsuki Subaru for the first time.

A trespasser in the corridors of memory, on her turf. That alone was already surprising enough, but what lit her chest alight was the ache of the memories she had eaten.

Somewhere in the memories her brother had eaten was someone who felt very strongly about him. She summoned him, calling out sweetly like a memory, and then she forced him down when he flew into a rage. And with a passion that made her chest feel like it might explode, she devoured his name and memories.

It was a good meal. She had fully digested his memories, and yet…

"Mister, do you remember us?"

Why was he still calm, even though she had eaten his memories?

Why was he glaring at him with such hate-filled eyes?

Why was her chest pounding, even when she was so bewildered?

Why, why, why, why, why…?

"…Eh?"

Seeking an answer for what had happened, she sank into the memories she had just gained.

How to begin to describe the scale of the shock Louis felt in that moment?

It was…

"Why do you have memories of dying?"

"———"

"Wait. It's not just that, mister. It's weird enough you have memories of dying. More than weird. But it doesn't make any sense. Since…"

"______"

"We don't remember ever killing you, even though you have a memory of being killed in one of the memories we've eaten!"

It was strange. A paradox that shouldn't be possible.

Was it the influence of Natsuki Subaru's memories? Her repertoire was expanding, including a vocabulary she should not possibly have known. It was a paradox. An emergency caused by a paradox, Schrödinger's Maxwell's Einstein was Nicola Tesla…

"What is this?! What is all this?! Memories aren't delusions! The dregs of a soul aren't something you can just warp at will! So! This is the world you saw, mister! This is your history…a story all your own!"

Louis ran her fingers through her long, long blond hair as something inside her exploded.

To think such an impossible, world-bending thing like this could exist.

"Mister, are you an Archbishop like us?"

"______"

"See! Petelgeuse is saying it in your memories, too! The factor is here! You're Pride and… Isn't that my seat?!"

Tapping her temple with her finger, Louis devoured the memories to the bone.

It was hard to believe. Unbelievable even. No one other than Gluttony could begin to believe it.

But because Louis could share the same memories, she could see for herself the path that Natsuki Subaru had taken. Or rather, she didn't have to believe it; she knew it for a fact. Because it was already the same path that Louis Arneb had taken now, too.

"Whoa, amazing! You really died! Horrifically! Pathetically! Over and over! No fair, no fair, no fair… No, it's so lovely! This is…this is death!!!"

Something that should not be possible, that should not exist, a memory of what lay beyond death.

Something fundamentally different from any of that near-death experience urban myth stuff, too. The curtain fall that signaled a soul shattering, a life scattering, a breath ceasing…

"—Return by Death…"

That was the great centerpiece of the memories that had taken root in her.

Accumulating the experience of countless deaths, carving them all into a soul that should only have been able to experience one, Natsuki Subaru was brimming with sediment.

And Natsuki Subaru had overcome every sort of difficulty.

"—want it."

Why had Natsuki Subaru been able to reach the corridors of memory?

Why was Natsuki Subaru not affected by Gluttony's power?

All those questions became like worthless confetti in the face of the ability to surpass death.

—Louis Arneb was searching for the greatest life.

And having consumed all sorts of lives, she had reached the conclusion that the greatest life didn't come from being wealthy or being loved by countless people, or being blessed with some great status.

The greatest life was a life that went according to plan.

A life where every hope, wish, and dream came true.

A perfect world where there was no inconvenience, where there was no incompleteness, where there was no unreasonableness.

Louis had always been searching for a way to make that happen. She had been searching inside herself for the answer all this time, but finally, she understood.

"It's Return by Death."

With that, she could undo anything she didn't like, undo any mistakes.

She could deal with the fact that there was no knowing what might happen in the future. No matter what went wrong, or was unfair, or was imperfect, as long as she knew she could do it again…

"We can live the best life!"

"———"

"What to do? How do we steal it? If your Return by Death is an authority, then just eating you won't be enough to take it. Things tied to memories and names are different. Witch Factor is the antithesis of the Odo Ragna! There's no easy way to strip it out! So…"

To steal an authority, she would have to steal the Witch Factor.

But Louis didn't know how to do that. She had never thought to steal any other Archbishop's authority. The thought of even touching them was repulsive.

"Wait! You can use Petelgeuse's authority…?"

The invisible hand in his memories, though it was massively degraded from its original form, was unmistakably the power that Petelgeuse had used. That meant Natsuki Subaru was living proof that it was possible to double-dip Witch Factors. To have multiple authorities.

If she stole that ability from him…

"…We can live our own life!"

"———"

"Ha-ha, isn't that great? Don't make us laugh! Someone who has everything could never understand the feelings of a have-not! A happy person can't comprehend the full measure of another person's unhappiness!"

She was sick and tired of annoying arguments forced on her by others.

No matter what pretty arguments Subaru might make, the truth was he had used his Return by Death to get here. There was no reason for her to tolerate any double standards.

What she needed was to figure out how to steal his authority…

"…No, that's not it. That's not our way."

Hitting her fist on her palm, Louis welcomed this revelation. Somewhere along the way she had confused her ends with her means. That was a terrible mistake.

She wanted to gain his authority to Return by Death. She wanted to live the best, most enjoyable life using it. But stealing it wasn't the goal.

After living so long as an Archbishop, she had come to think about everything in terms of violence, which clouded her mind.

It was simple. If she just needed to get access to it instead of stealing it…

"We can just become you."

"———"

"We can just become you, if we just consume you with Gluttony's authority…we can merge with you, Witch Factor and all."

Saying that, Louis pinched her cheek and pulled violently.

It wasn't to be cute, but to injure. Why? To rend her flesh and spill her blood, splitting off a part of herself.

"The three great demon beasts. Those monsters were made the previous owner of our Witch Factor long, long ago. We can do something similar. We just never did is all, since there wasn't much reason to…"

"———"

"But if we put our mind to it, we can do anything."

It was a monster of possibility. The infinite possibility of a creature before it was born. A creature fated to live the ultimate life before long.

""That is our existence.""

Louis's slowly spun words overlapped.

The same voice resonated in stereo, and it was not the sort of thing that was just a trick of the mind. This was exactly what it sounded like. The same voice, in the same tone, spoken by the same person, but from two sources.

"I was surprised by your memories, mister. I didn't know Arneb is a rabbit constellation. And it was shocking to find out you were the ones who destroyed the Great Rabbits.”

“But in that case, it shouldn’t be too surprising, right? Are you happy to see another cute little Louis? Or not? Not, right? You aren’t the type to crave little kids. Hmm, I see.”

Seeing him open his eyes in shock, Louis wrapped her arms around someone with the exact same face as her—around Louis.

Because this was the corridors of memory, a place removed from reality. Louis was just a soul attached to a Witch Factor, without any body. That was the only reason this could work.

She could peel off a bit of her soul, break herself into two, and create another being.

It was probably not something that Lye or Roy could do, since they lost themselves when using Solar Eclipse. Making a copy of herself was the sort of wild feat that only Louis, with her weak sense of self, could pull off.

And Louis, who alone could manage that, was the only one capable of reaching out to claim the ability of Return by Death.

“———”

The boy who was a receptacle for a Witch Factor was saying something.

When she looked at him, a loving feeling welled up inside Louis, a desire for something apart from the allure of his power. It was vexing, so she relinquished the memories causing that feeling. Peeling it from her soul, she cast it aside as if it was no longer needed. No, not *as if*. It truly was no longer needed.

All those memories were nothing more than a snack to allow her to hold on until she achieved the ultimate life. But Louis Arneb had finally found her full course.

““We can do anything we put our mind to.””

To do that, Louis Arneb would eat away at Natsuki Subaru from the inside, and once she was done, she would consume him entirely from the outside and gain Natsuki Subaru for herself.

“—■■■■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■ *it.*”

To the very end, the receptacle said something, refusing to go down smoothly.

She ignored that and licked up every last dreg attached to his soul, completely inheriting his memories.

She attuned herself with the now empty shell devoid of memories and readied herself to steal the memories of someone she had already eaten once before—in search of the greatest, the ultimate experience.

Louis waited impatiently for the ultimate main dish that would grant her happiness to arrive…

"So, did you see what you wanted to see, Louis Arneb?"

"Huh?"

Louis's eyes opened wide when she suddenly realized she was being addressed.

Blinking repeatedly, she confirmed where she had woken up. A white world, a white floor, and a white sky. Standing upright in that pure white space, Louis touched her own face in a daze.

"——"

She patted her face all over to confirm it.

There was no mirror here, so she couldn't say for sure, but there was no mistaking that feeling. It was her own face. This wasn't a place where any sort of entertainment could be found, and the only things she could really touch were her own face and body. It only took her an instant to confirm the shape of her own face. This was, without a doubt, Louis's body.

In a daze, she slowly checked herself. Right about the time she finished, that question came again.

"Did you see what you wanted to see?"

Looking up, Louis saw the shabby boy with short black hair, a long torso and short legs, and menacing eyes.

His name was Natsuki Subaru, and until moments ago, Louis had been him, too…

"…Ah."

And he was the holder of Return by Death, making him a nightmarish being beyond imagination.

"Nooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!"

She screamed.

She screamed with all her might, raising her voice with all her being.

If she didn't do that, she would be crushed by it—the fear, the dread, the despair.

She was trapped in the madness of the constant deaths repeating over and over and over.

"Nooo! We don't want to die! No no no no no no no no no no! Noooo!!!"

Clutching her head, she fell to the ground and pleaded desperately.

Once she transformed into that being, Louis had experienced death at last. She had savored its taste. By allowing herself to be taken into a soul that could come back from death, she was able to experience an ability that could even go against the flow of time.

The fresh, new stimulation that she so desired…she had wanted to know what sort of flavor death had.

Even if it wasn’t as great as she expected, using the authority to Return by Death, the right to live a life with redos, was more than enough as a consolation prize.

That was what she had thought—until she experienced death herself.

“That’s…that’s unbearable! That suffering! That loss! There’s no way we can bear it! It’s impossible! We don’t wanna! Nooo!”

There was no easy way to die.

There was no sweetness in death.

Not once had she wished for her own death.

Those were her experiences through more than twenty loops as Natsuki Subaru.

“No human could endure that! Monster! You’re a monster!”

No one could. It was impossible.

Louis had gorged on countless lives, violating every sort of soul in search of a life for herself. Because she believed that she had the right, the unique privilege to do so. So she had also indulged herself with Natsuki Subaru’s soul—and as a result, her naive ■■■■■ shattered.

Because…

“A human heart can’t endure its own death!!!”

We want to be happy.

We want to be happy. We want to be happy. We want to be happy. We want to be happy.

We want to be happy. We want to be happy. We want to be happy. We want…ed to be happy.

We wanted to be happy.

That was what Louis Arneb had always pictured, and what she had wished for all this time.

She had the right to use her power to trample anything and everything to attain the ultimate life for herself. Because she had believed that without any moral qualms, that was how she had lived to this day.

But the foundation of that assumption had crumbled.

She had wanted to be happy. But now her wish was different.

“We don’t want to die.”

We don’t want to die.

We don’t want to die. We don’t want to die. We don’t want to die.

We don’t wanna die. We don’t wanna die. We don’t wanna die. We don’t wanna die. We don’t wanna die. We don’t wanna die. We don’t wanna die. We don’t wanna die. We don’t wanna die…

“I told you when you tried to eat me.”

Slumping over and holding her head, Louis desperately tried to protect herself.

Someone stood over her, and the same voice from before reached her ears. She didn't want to hear it. She was scared to hear it. But it was horrifying to think what might befall her if she didn't listen.

So, terrified of dying, Louis had to listen as the voice continued.

"Like I warned you…you'll definitely regret it."

3

Standing in front of the girl weeping in terror from experiencing his Return by Death, Natsuki Subaru looked at the palm of his hand.

Not because being called a monster hurt him. He understood why someone might want to call him crazy, saying no normal person could bear it. He was aware himself that experiencing this much death wasn't ordinary. He was just gritting his teeth and bearing it for the people most precious to him.

"…Yeah, I really am incredible, Natsuki Subaru."

Clenching his hand, Subaru complimented himself, from the bottom of his heart.

There had been times when he praised himself in a flippant way that didn't really match up with reality. And he had done it before as a sort of consolation or to pump himself up.

But the praises he sang this time were different.

The memories of a certain Natsuki Subaru felt terribly distant, but having observed them objectively, Subaru complimented himself on the path he had walked to this day.

"It's weird. Turns out I'm really something."

And he could say the same for Natsuki Subaru, who lost his memories and had reverted to the original state he was in when he first arrived in this new world, only to come all this way by reading the books of the dead.

Starting from a complete blank slate in a new world, he had experienced as many deaths as Subaru had in a year, and he'd finally managed to rendezvous with Subaru here…

"Meili and Shaula…leave them to me."

Meili's future was dark and at risk of closing off entirely because murder had become a habit for her.

Shaula wanted her happiness to continue, even after being freed from her four hundred years of waiting.

"Ram and Julius are both pushing themselves. And if the two of them are doing that, then…"

Ram always knew the best choice and practiced a level of discretion that made her more reliable than anyone.

Julius had lost his pillar but still held on to his conviction as he continued to swing his sword.

"Beatrice and Echidna, too—to think I would just be causing trouble from start to finish. Sheesh, what am I…?"

Beatrice devotedly supported him and noticed his heart's limits before anyone else.

Echidna was the most suspicious of the memoryless Subaru but had still forgiven him in the end.

"———"

And you, the one I will always be drawn to, no matter how many times I have to repeat things, and even if I lose my memory. That's just how I want it. That's how it has to be. I can't imagine it any other way.

That's just how much…

"E M T"

With an expression of love and serenity on his lips, Subaru raised his head.

He glanced over at Louis, who was still cradling her head and trembling.

"Hey."

"Eep!"

"…Get a grip already."

Subaru scratched his cheek, watching her shudder so dramatically at a single sound.

The girl looked young enough to be a little child. Seeing a girl like that tremble in terror, desperately trying to reject the world around her, did make something swell in his heart. The way she naturally stirred people's protective instincts was as effective as it was sinister.

It might even have been a pure and natural distillation of that emotion that she was forced to develop, since Louis Arneb, knowing so little of the world, was like a newborn child, in a sense.

However…

"This is your loss, Louis Arneb."

Natsuki Subaru wouldn't forgive Louis Arneb, even when she wept like a baby.

Louis's eyes widened quietly at his merciless declaration.

He watched the terror fill her eyes like ink spilled across a white page, but his heart was still, like a calm sea.

This wasn't a problem that could be excused just because she didn't know the ways of the world. Louis and her brothers had committed countless inhuman, demonic sins that could never be forgiven.

It wasn't as if she had no chance to understand, either. She experienced every sort of emotion through others' memories, so she had plenty of opportunity to develop a sense of right and wrong. But what she'd internalized was just the unsightly drive to sate her darkest urges. Maybe she'd had bad teachers. Her older brothers were bad role models, for sure. But it was her choice to never take the opportunity to walk a better path in life.

"If you've experienced a piece of me, then you probably know. But you Archbishops, your titles are the same as the Seven Deadly Sins. It's definitely the sort of phrase that sets a nerd's heart aflutter, but there's also the Seven Heavenly Virtues, too."

The Seven Deadly Sins were Pride, Wrath, Jealousy, Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, and Lust.

The Seven Heavenly Virtues were Prudence, Fortitude, Justice, Hope, Temperance, Faith, and Charity.

If the Seven Sins were a sort of inescapable karma, then the Seven Virtues were a promise that must never be forgotten. It was a reminder that people living in sin could still live for the sake of others.

By respecting one another, people could live side by side.

"But you…*all of you* violated that."

That was why the Archbishops were unforgivable. Why Louis Arneb was unforgivable.

"Louis Arneb, you've lost. Acknowledge it and let everything go."

Subaru made his demand as Louis recoiled in terror.

He showed no mercy to the girl who was stuck in soul-numbing despair after experiencing Return by Death so many times.

"You said before you can do anything you set your mind to. So…"

She managed to split her entire self in two, incorporating everything from her pride and self-esteem to her Witch Factor. If she could do that, then there was no way that erasing the effects of her power should be impossible. If she could manage that, if she could at least do that much, then…

The people whose memories and names were stolen could be brought back…Rem could be brought back.

"Release everyone you've ever consumed," he said forcefully. "If you do…"

"…I-if we do…then what?" Louis interrupted.

Slumped down on the white floor, Louis was holding her knees. With her long, long blond hair spread out around her on the floor, she peered out at Subaru from behind her hair. Her eyes were filled entirely with unmistakable dread.

"…Free everyone you've eaten. Even if they're dead, returning their names will give them back some dignity. And anyone still alive can reunite with their families. If you do that, I'll—"

"Let us go? There's no way! Of course not!"

"Wha—?"

"There's no way you would let us go! You annihilate your enemies! Totally and completely! You pitch the perfect game all the way to the end! Because you can! That's why there's no way you wouldn't! There's no reason not to!"

Louis erupted with overflowing emotion, saying what sounded almost like a joke.

"Give back what we've eaten? Never! That's our lifeline! Without that, you can kill us! You've got it flipped! To not die, we can never give it back…we can't!"

Louis's outburst was a true paroxysm. Her face was a mess, and it was impossible to tell if she was laughing, raging, or grieving. And it was all tinged with terror.

Everything flowing from her lips was tied directly to her fear.

Whether she tried to introduce joy or anger or sadness was irrelevant. If the result would always be terror, what was there to be happy or angry or sad about?

Subaru well understood Louis's deep-rooted rejection. She cursed the whole world, battered by a swirl of doubt and suspicion until it felt like it was impossible to move.

That was a hell Natsuki Subaru had also experienced.

What freed him from that hell was having someone to hold his hand, because that warmth didn't let Subaru escape.

It was the silver-haired girl who had saved his life and his heart when he first came to this different world.

It was the blue-haired girl who'd kindly hurt him as he tried to abandon everything.

—They were the reasons Natsuki Subaru had not remained trapped in that hell.

"______"

But Louis Arneb, drowning in terror before his eyes, didn't have any support like that.

It was a hackneyed expression, but no one can live alone. So to save the girl trapped by terror, someone would have to reach out a hand.

Just like someone had reached out a hand to Subaru before.

However…

"I'm not going to save you."

That someone wouldn't be Subaru.

The Archbishop had committed an unforgivable sin. That was Natsuki Subaru's judgment.

"I won't save you. And I won't feel bad about it, either."

"Eep."

There was nothing but fear for Subaru in her wide eyes.

Subaru was the only one here who could understand her terror, but he was also the source of it. So there was no escape for her.

When her fear reached its limit, she rejected Subaru with every fiber of her being.

"I-it's…it's too much!!"

"…This is…"

Slowly, Subaru's vision started to warp, and a change appeared in the corridors of time. As if the world detected the presence of a foreign object and was twisting in order to eliminate it.

As a result, Subaru's body began to sway.

"We don't want to be in the same space as you a second longer! We physically can't bear it! Our essence can't bear it! Our fate can't bear it! So disappear! Dear brother and brother dearest will eat you! Whichever one wants you! We're out, though!"

Her decision, frustrating as it was, was the best choice available to her.

Removing Subaru's presence, erasing him from this world. He had no way to stand his ground. Nothing to hold on to and only a vague sense of ground to stand on. His soul was being peeled away from this white realm.

"If you don't like me…you can just settle it yourself…"

"We won't take the bait! You can't get us to try to kill you! You just want to come back through death and take it out on us! We won't let you! Our brothers will devour you! That's how we'll win!!!"

Louis glared at Subaru with her teeth bared while he simply tried to hold on. Understanding that he could no longer hold out, he took a deep breath.

His black eyes pierced her…

"…Eep."

"If your brothers are your last resort, then fine. I'll crush that hope and then make you pay. Prepare yourself, Louis Arneb." He pointed at the trembling, terrified girl. "All the things you don't like, all the painful stuff, you're going to carry that yourself. Don't run away from your memories."

Shame and regret were crucial ingredients in the memories that shaped people.

They were nourishment for the person that was Natsuki Subaru, and they were building blocks in the Natsuki Subaru who had come here after enduring so many deaths.

If Natsuki Subaru was incredible, then it was because his shame and regret made him that way.

"That said, I don't want to go through that shame again."

His vision started going white, and his thoughts grew distant. The corridors of memory unwound…

Now that the terrifying being was gone at last from the corridors of memory, Louis Arneb let out a long, long, trembling breath and confirmed she was still alive.

"How…?"

How could he be okay? She couldn't understand it. Her understanding of Natsuki Subaru before and after experiencing death herself was completely different. She couldn't understand him. It was impossible. She couldn't steal everything from that terrifying monster.

Why, for example, had she not been able to steal his memories from before he was *isekai* summoned, or whatever he called it?

Gluttony's power should have consumed all of the target's memories from the moment they were born. And yet she could only steal a little over a year's worth of memories from that *thing*.

It was as if the Odo Ragna loathed the memories before that point, or else…

"…Hey, this isn't what we talked about."

Suddenly, a voice rang out in the corridors of memory where she should have been all alone. Louis spun around in shock, but her surprise quickly dissipated.

Standing before her was…

"Us…"

"Right, us. We drew the short end of the stick. We've been waiting this whole time with nothing to show for it. Did you set up the ultimate life environment with mister, like we planned?"

A mirror-image Louis grinned back at her.

Another her in the truest sense, created by splitting a soul that should have been one to create the same but also different being.

And that other Louis had not experienced what she had. This sneering Louis felt almost alien.

"—? What is it, us? Why that look? Where is mister? Us being here means he entered the book of the dead again, right?"

"______"

"Hey, you did your job, right? We didn't get him here, but you performed your role, didn't you? Wow, wow. You slipped in neatly. That sillyhead didn't even notice us inside him!"

Dancing and clapping, the other Louis reminisced on that forbidden rendezvous.

Of course, the original Louis knew about it, too, and didn't need to be told. That was when Subaru connected to the corridors of memory from Reid Astrea's book of the dead, trying to search for a way to deal with that tyrannical swordsman. That was where the splinter Louis made contact with the monster that had forgotten everything and tried her luck by consuming it—including Louis who was hidden as a Witch Factor.

That plan failed, due to the resistance of memories that were supposed to have been consumed. However, if they had not gotten in the way then, Louis would have become one with that thing by now. When Louis thought about merging with that *thing*…

"Hey, what is it? Talk more! Tell us! You saw it, right? You heard it, right? Smelled it, right? Tasted it, right? Natsuki Subaru's authority!"

"—Don't say its name!!!"

Speaking excitedly, the splinter Louis reached out her hand. But the moment it touched Louis's shoulder, she erupted, brushing away her other half's arm.

"…Huh?"

Of course, her other half didn't understand why she was being rejected, and her expression clouded. But Louis didn't have the composure to notice splinter Louis's reaction. Louis clutched the shoulder that *a stranger* tried to touch and shook her head wildly as she fell back.

"No! No, no, no! Don't touch us! Don't get any closer!"

She was terrified. Terrified of the splinter Louis, of the person with the same face, the person who had experienced the same things as she had.

The being that was the other half of her soul…felt like a complete stranger.

And there was no telling what a stranger might do. A stranger wouldn't protect Louis. A stranger could kill her. And she didn't want to die.

"Stay away! Stay away stay away stay away! Don't get any closer! Don't touch us!"

She hugged her body, unable to do anything more than she had when she faced that *thing*.

Splinter Louis's eyes widened in confusion at seeing Louis push her away.

"Huh? What's that about?"

Splinter Louis clenched her hand that had been brushed away. And with a terribly strained voice, she looked down at Louis and gnashed her teeth.

"What's this? What, what, what's going on? By what right and whose permission?!"

"Eeep!"

"This isn't what we planned! What is this?! What's this reaction?! This attitude?! Answer us!"

Flying into a rage at being rejected, the splinter advanced on the cowering original. Crouching down in front of the frozen Louis, she grabbed her trembling other half by the hair and hauled her up. Two identical faces were now eye to eye, close enough to feel each other's breath.

"Strange. Strange, strange, strange, isn't it? It's strange. That's right, it's strange. It's too strange. We're saying it's too strange!!!"

"———"

"What about the plan? It went like we planned, didn't it? You slipped into that empty mister and set our nasty plan in motion, didn't you? Good job! He was scared! He believed he was just the closest stranger to Natsuki Subaru!"

Louis said nothing as splinter Louis reviewed their plan.

It was true that their plan had proceeded smoothly. Louis had experienced the Return by Death inside Subaru, and using her tricks, she had convinced Subaru to see Natsuki Subaru as a different person. All the while, splinter Louis had remained in the corridors of memory, ready to eat Subaru when he became a separate entity from Natsuki Subaru, to take his authority for herself. They had been one step away.

"Even if it didn't work, we could have done it again, tens, hundreds of times, even! The plan was to keep going until we stole his authority, wasn't it?! It was just a small blunder! We can just steal his memories again and keep trying as many times as we want. We can even trade positions, trying over and over and over again! Any mistakes can just be fixed!"

The plan was to trade roles and keep going over and over, without end, until they perfectly usurped and stole his power.

And yet…

"And yet you're rejecting us!"

"Nooooooooo!!!"

"Whah!"

Louis shrieked in pain and fear as the hand gripping her hair pulled. And then she pushed splinter Louis's chest, sending her other half to the ground, where she landed with a painful groan.

They stared at each other in disbelief as an unbearable silence filled the space.

And with Louis unable to say anything, splinter Louis's eyes flared.

"Were you…planning to keep the authority for yourself?"

"———"

"Once you had his power to yourself, you were planning to erase him and have all the fun by yourself. You were going to forget about us."

"N-no!"

Astonished, frozen, the splinter Louis stumbled upon a disgusting suspicion, even as the original Louis shouted in response. That wasn't it. That wasn't it at all. She didn't have any desire to keep something like this to herself.

If she could throw it away, she would. But she couldn't do that. Because they were none other than Louis Arneb's own memories. She couldn't erase her own memories. She couldn't steal them. She couldn't lock them away.

"All the things you don't like, all the painful stuff, you're going to carry that yourself. Don't run away from your memories!"

At that very moment, what that *thing* said earlier crossed her mind. She couldn't forget what she had experienced; she couldn't erase the path she had walked. That was the history of Louis Arneb that had been born inside her.

"This isn't funny! You think we'll let you…?!"

She had wanted to be happy. She had wanted to attain a blessed life all her own. But the life all her own that she had managed to find unexpectedly crushed Louis's ■■■■■—Louis's *heart*—into dust, wounding her irreparably.

And the splinter Louis couldn't understand the Louis who was cowering because of the wound to her heart and just sheer exhaustion.

"You think we'll let you keep our ticket to happiness to yourself?!"

"No! You've got it wrong! That's not it! That's not it at all!!!"

"Liar! We never would have expected you to betray us! As expected of us! Right. Right. Yeah. We understand, us!"

The splinter hopped to her feet, putting her hands together in front of her chest. And then her lips cracked into a giant grin as she glanced at Louis, who was pleading tearfully.

"If you happened to be planning a little trick for us, once you got your hands on that power, there would be no way of winning! Amazing! Well thought out!"

"We don't want to die! We don't want to dieeeeee!!!"

"What an obvious lie! You don't want to die? Why? If you don't want it, then give it to us! Keeping it to yourself…you don't care about us at all!"

Splinter Louis rejected the other half of herself.

And in doing that, Louis felt something shatter inside her. It felt like she heard something crumbling. Though she didn't know what the sound was, shattering inside her.

She didn't know, but…

"Natsuki Subaru is ours, you thief!"

She talked like she was superior, even though she didn't know anything about that *thing*.

Even though she was the only one who really understood that *thing*.

Even though we're the ones who understand.

“We’re the only ones who know Natsuki Subaru, you stupid girl.”

It was terrifying, repulsive. It was odious.

So…

“Let us savor him, too!!!”

The splinter lunged forward to rob the original of the memories that made her Louis.

But handing them over would mean the death of Louis Arneb.

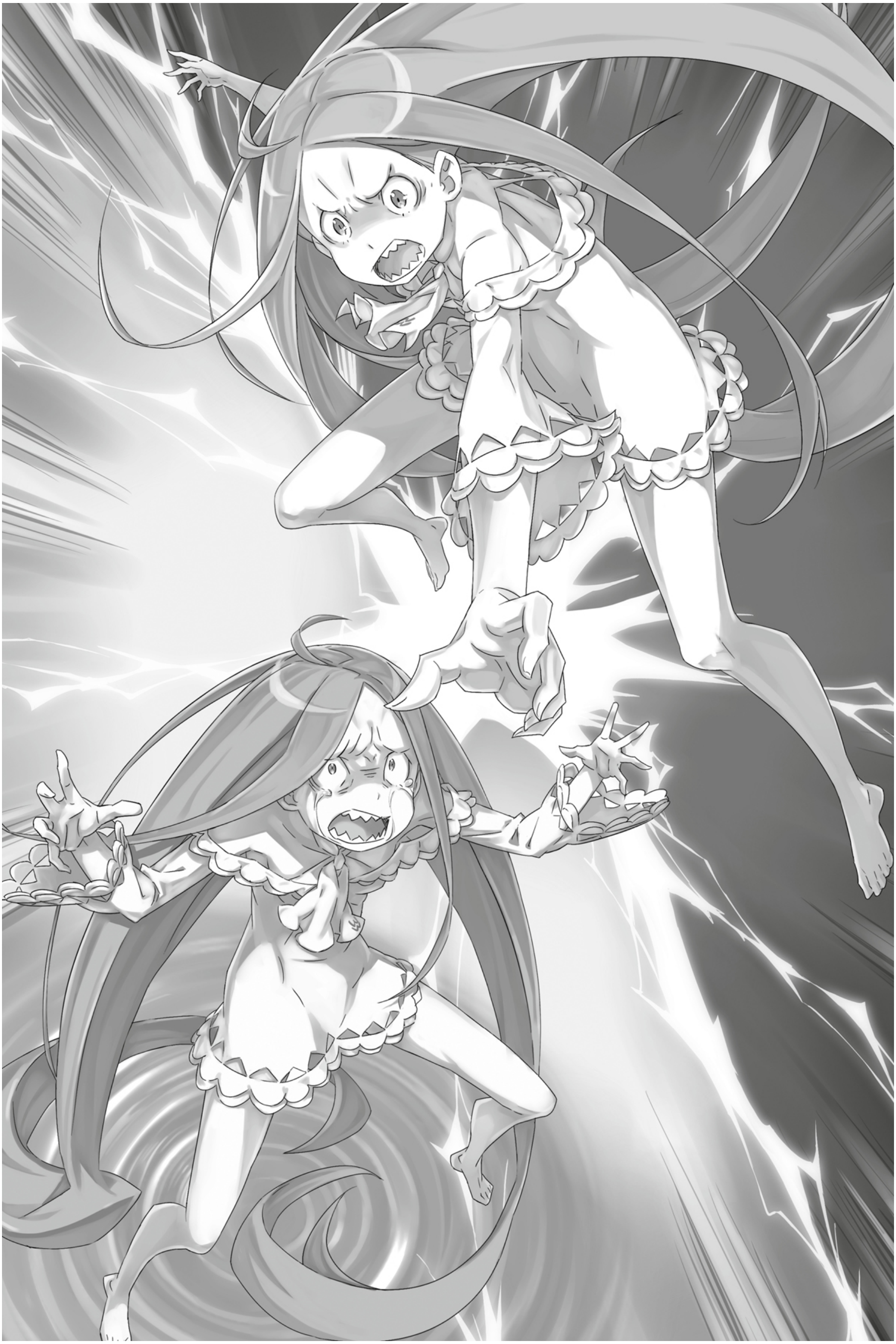
It would mean death. It would mean the world that *thing* had seen.

“Aaaaaaaaaaghhhhhh!!!”

Shout. Shout. Shout. Shout. Shout. Shout.

She kept screaming, screaming and screaming and screaming.

“We don’t want to die.”



A terrible, gruesome, and meaningless battle began in the corridors of memory.

A battle watched by none. One no one cared about.

And so it began—and ended. A battle without a victor.

5

“Icebrand Arts!!!”

The moment she said it, she got a good grip on the object that formed in the palms of her hands and swung hard. A longsword made of ice had appeared, and it was far sharper than any ordinary blade.

Emilia had only just begun training with it, but moving her body was her forte. Swinging the blade as an extension of herself, she blocked off her opponent’s escape and tried to land a lethal blow.

However…

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Not bad! But that’s not enough. Not even close enough to reach us!”

“Grrr.”

Her earnest attack was evaded by her opponent, who slid along the ground as his long hair fluttered.

The one staring at her with bared canines was the Archbishop of Gluttony who called himself Lye Batenkaitos.

Hearing the title Archbishop, Emilia felt a hazy dislike swell in her chest.

That was because she had clashed with a bunch of Archbishops in Pristella. Some of those fights had been settled for good while some were just beginning. Put simply, there was a lot of serious stuff involved.

So many sad and painful things had happened there.

They still had not resolved everything that started in Pristella, which was why everyone was working so hard.

“Why are you like that…?!”

“Why? Why? Why indeed? Why do you say? Why is it? Why, why, why, why, why, why?!”

The words he was saying had no trace of seriousness. He wasn’t someone who intended to give a proper answer.

Sensing that, Emilia hardened her expression. It would be best if he could be reasoned with. But if he wasn’t interested in talking, then there was no need to hesitate anymore.

“Icicle Line.”

“Whoa.”

In time with her incantation, there was a sound of the air crackling behind her readied ice blade. It was the sound of dozens of ice stakes with sharp points forming, and a signal that they were ready to be unleashed.

Lye still looked untroubled, but Emilia paid him no mind. She simply trusted in her icy resolve and unleashed her attack.

In an instant, almost a hundred ice stakes were unleashed.

The stone passageway was filled with shards of ice from the ceiling to the floor, as if the air itself was joining her attack.

But…

"Sorry, miss. We're tired of seeing that…is maybe overstating it, but we've seen this one already. We're a genius, you see, so once we've seen an attack, it won't ever hit us!"

Swinging the short swords fastened to both his arms, Lye endured the terrific ice barrage with a sneer.

Emilia gasped at his skill and at the fact that he really did manage to endure it without a scratch. But if he withstood it once, then she would do it a second time, and a third, and even more, if that wasn't enough.

"You think you will win if you do it a hundred times? Even a thousand wouldn't be enough."

"Then I'll do it ten thousand times! I won't let you reach the others!"

"Ah-ha-ha, that's a crazy proposition! Talk about outrageous!"

Lye put a hand to his forehead, a gesture that was equal parts annoyance and exasperation. Watching him, she quietly inhaled and prepared to make good on her word.

She had said it in the heat of the moment, but she just had to do it.

One hundred, one thousand, ten thousand. She just had to do what the others couldn't.

So she prepared to embark on that task—

"Lye Batenkaitos!!!"

Behind her, a voice that was neither hers nor Lye's rang out, stopping Emilia in her tracks. Drawn by the voice, she spun around, seeing him turn the corner down the hall.

A boy with black hair and a bit of a mean look in his eyes had appeared. He was rushing onto the battlefield with a valiant look on his face after spotting her and Lye battling there in the hall.

"Ah…"

Immediately she thought, *Oh no.*

She had to say something, but for a brief moment, her mind went blank. Too many emotions welled up in her when she saw him.

But before any confusion could appear in his eyes, she quickly said what had to be said.

"It's dangerous, so wait! Ummm, I'm, well, you probably don't know me, but that guy's the enemy! Leave this place to me! Even though you probably don't remember me!"

Leave this place to me. And please don't think about me too much.

For right now, in this moment, if she thought about anything other than fighting, she might cry. She didn't want to cause anyone more trouble by letting that weakness show.

And yet…

"It's okay, Emilia-tan."

The boy racing toward her called her name.

That was all it took to blow away the unease and sadness that she had just barely managed to keep bottled up inside.

Because…

"I'm your knight, Natsuki Subaru!"

…because something set Emilia's chest aflame.

CHAPTER 4

READY, STEADY, GO

1

Spurred on by powerful emotions, running with all his might, Subaru caught sight of a certain person.

When their slender and graceful figure came into view, his heart almost exploded.

Overflowing love punched him in the chest, but he somehow managed to contain it. This wasn't the time to die from the cuteness.

And he also thought, *I'm glad I was the one who got here first.*

He knew what to say, he knew how to call out to her. And more importantly, what he wanted to call her.

"It's okay, Emilia-tan."

Sorry for worrying you, sorry for troubling you, and sorry for making you wait.

With all of that imbued in his words, he nodded, even as his expression softened despite the dire situation. And as understanding blossomed in the silver-haired girl's eyes from just that one phrase, he continued.

Subaru struck a pose, with his left hand on his hip and his right hand raised, finger pointing upward…

"I'm your knight, Natsuki Subaru!"

"______"

Emilia's eyes shot open.

That was all they needed to understand instantly. Even with Gluttony's authority menacing them, they were going to be fine.

And as Emilia stopped moving with her attention on Subaru…

"Ha-ha-ha! That's a little too careless, don't you think?!"

Lye leaped at her back, saliva dripping from his mouth.

His disheveled, long brown hair flying, Lye took aim at Emilia with both of his blades. Just before they slit her neck, though, her silver hair sank straight down.

"Eh?"

"Not…in the…least!!!"

With a stirring shout, Emilia traced a beautiful arc with her long, slender legs. The spinning kick she unleashed from a sinking stance landed heel first, right in Lye's face.

"Uryaaaaaa!"

Just as it made contact, she supplemented it with an Ice Boot, sending Lye's body flying.

His front teeth broke, and he spun from the force of the kick, sliding across the frozen floor of the passage. Emilia turned her palms on him and mercilessly launched a storm of icicles, dealing massive damage to Gluttony.

Subaru shouted with joy at watching Lye's counterattack fail:

"Success! My distraction and Emilia-tan's cute killer instinct made a perfect… Wagh?!"

"Subaru!"

Just as Emilia leaped onto him, he somehow managed to catch her, even as he was stunned by her warmth and softness.

"E-Emilia-tan?! That caught me by surprise, and you're so soft and smell so nice! Did you change your shampoo?!"

"You idiot! You big dummy! I was so, so worried! And you… dummy! Stupid, stupid!"

"You're really laying into me! Not that I have any excuse, though…"

Subaru faltered as Emilia looked up at him with those big eyes. And holding her so close, he felt his heart hammering up a storm.

"Anyway, I'm sorry for worrying you. But I'm back… Revived? In the thick of things? A perfect Natsuki Subaru? Something along those lines. So it's okay now."

He rambled in the heat of the moment, trying his best to put Emilia at ease. But as he did that, Emilia's eyes blinked, and she gently put her finger on his chest.

It was a ticklish, gentle touch. Subaru's body shuddered…

"Are you together?"

"———"

"The you without your memories was still you. So even if you remember everything, the other you who was trying so hard is…"

"…Ah. Yeah. It's fine."

Falteringly, still touching his chest, Emilia confirmed the path he had taken.

With the merger of their memories, they had become one, and there was a Natsuki Subaru who could be thought of as having disappeared, but that Natsuki Subaru had still been connected with everyone's hearts for a time.

"He's still there inside me and inside you, too. So it's really okay."

"…Mmm."

"So keep your eyes peeled for what perfect Natsuki Subaru can do now. All this pent-up frustration from this torrent of developments is gonna be the craziest nitrox. It's time for us to blast off into a bright future!"

"Sorry, I really don't understand what you're saying."

Emilia just shook her head as Subaru grinned and flashed a thumbs-up.

Even that cool attitude was adorable, and he would really have loved to spend minutes, hours, even days more messing around with Emilia like this, but…

"There are a lot of problems we have to clean up."

The five obstacles blocking their way in the watchtower—even with Natsuki Subaru's identity problem resolved, Subaru's delightful and precious comrades were still in danger.

However, there had been a lot of developments. For example, the tidal wave of shadow that swallowed up the entire tower made this whole operation a race against the clock. That was the Witch of Jealousy's calamity, and it had happened before in the Sanctuary.

The cause that time had been him talking about Return by Death with Echidna inside her grave. Assuming it was the same reason now, then the shadow would ruin everything again if his secret got out. In other words, Louis Arneb finding out about Return by Death and taking up residence inside him was the prime culprit.

Now that Louis had been removed from Subaru, it was maybe fifty-fifty whether the shadow would swallow up the Pleiades Watchtower now.

That wasn't much reason to start getting optimistic about things, but…

"Emilia-tan! I have an idea!"

"—! Got it! Then let's do it!"

"I didn't say anything yet!"

"It's fine! If it's your idea, then you must have come up with it after thinking about it really hard! I'd rather put my faith in that instead of trying to think of everything myself right now and making a snap judgment!"

"Argh, damn it! You know just what to say to make me smile!"

Subaru was stunned by her ready acceptance, but Emilia answered with a full-throated show of faith in him. He scratched his cheek, feeling like he had to live up to that trust, before pointing down the hall filled with shards of ice.

"First of all, just to be sure, give him another blast!"

"Ey!"

There was a loud thud as Emilia dropped a massive block of ice down the tunnel.

It would be nice if that unflinching blast was a finisher, but the odds were slim. In fact, peering intently at the point of impact, Emilia gasped.

"Subaru! The Archbishop is gone!"

"*Tsk*, resilient little asshole. But you definitely landed a clean blow earlier."

That cockroach-like hardiness was frustrating, but running away the moment he judged the situation to be disadvantageous set him apart from Petelgeuse, who was so diligent and straightforward, or from Regulus, who didn't have the word *humility* in his vocabulary. But there was no way that Lye had left the tower entirely yet.

"Emilia-tan! For now, we need to meet up with everyone! We have to adjust our deployment! If everyone doesn't do their best, we won't be able to get through this!"

"Okay! But is it okay to just let him go?"

"Honestly, if we could have finished that bastard, then that would have been great, but…"

It wouldn't be easy to pin a tail on Lye after he had gotten away, and if they were going to waste time searching for him, it would be better to prioritize meeting up with everyone, so Lye could live for now.

"You don't need to worry. He won't leave the tower. Louis…his sister should be begging for help, and considering how bad his sister complex is, that guy won't run away."

"Sister complex…?"

"As in he's obsessed with his little sister. Not exactly a healthy relationship in their case."

At the very least, he had not sensed any sort of familial love for her brothers in Louis. Those guys were either pathetic victims, devoting themselves to Louis without realizing the truth, or else they were dedicated role-playing fanatics.

Either way, the Archbishops were reliably twisted people.

"I guess if they were more flexible and could change up on the fly, they wouldn't have become Archbishops."

After having had so many unwanted interactions with them, that was his conclusion. They never considered that they might be wrong. They were obsessively devoted to their own ideas and forced them on everyone around them. Because of that, they didn't admit defeat and couldn't retreat.

To destroy them…

"Emilia-tan! We need to get everyone else!"

"Mmm, got it! But where are they…?"

"Leave that to SubaNavi, your Subaru's onboard navigation system."

Activating SubaNavi, Greed's authority, he searched for the responses from their comrades around the tower. That was just a fun way for Subaru to refer to Cor Leonis—the power that allowed him to perceive the manifestation of his precious bonds.

It was an ability that let him sense the presence of his comrades, and it was the most valuable power Subaru currently possessed. He couldn't comprehend how Regulus could be so isolated despite having this power. It was almost a sort of genius. A pathetic, pitiful virtuoso who could only become an Archbishop…

"This isn't the time to be pitying him, though… Ah, found them."

Once he found the faint lights he could sense using that power, Subaru raised his head.

First priority was linking up with the people who Emilia had made sure escaped. Meaning…

"First things first, time to retrieve my adorable little partner!"

2

Cor Leonis allowed Subaru to grasp the general gist of what was happening inside the Pleiades Watchtower.

This was possible because he could gauge the general condition of his comrades and a vague sense of how far they were from him. And on top of that, Subaru felt something odd smoldering in his chest.

"———"

He was using the power that he had, without thinking, called Cor Leonis—or SubaNavi, like he'd joked earlier—to find his friends, but he had a feeling that wasn't where its true strength lay.

Cor Leonis, "Lion's Heart" in Latin. It referred to Regulus, a first-magnitude star in the constellation Leo. And Regulus was also Latin, meaning…

"Subaru!"

As they turned the corner in the passage, Emilia shouted to Subaru once she spotted what lay ahead. Thanks to the Lion's Heart, Subaru already knew the reason for her shout.

Following the faint light and warmth, he saw his friends, who had set out on their own mission.

"Beako!" "Beatrice!"

"—?! S-Subaru and some unknown girl?!"

Beatrice was taken aback when she saw the two of them running toward her, but Subaru and Emilia ignored her confusion, and they both leaped at Beatrice, lifting her in a hug even as she cried out:

"Whah?!"

"Ohhh, Beako! Beako! You're so light! So adorable! And such an intelligent-looking face!"

“Look, Beatrice! Subaru remembered everything! Ah, but you probably don’t remember me…but Subaru remembering me at least made me *reeeeally* happy!”

“W-wait one moment! Wait! My head is a mess, like a birthday she knew and one she didn’t all coming together!”

Beatrice was bewildered and rattled by their combined onslaught, but she soon held out her hands, silencing Emilia first.

“…Subaru, do you really remember everything? About Betty, and about how Betty lived…? All of it?”

“Yeah, I do. Don’t look so worried. I remember everything, and I can sprinkle a few hoaxes in for good measure, too. A historia all our own.”

“There’s no need to make up things that didn’t happen, I suppose! Argh!”

Held up in the air, Beatrice squeezed Subaru’s face between her hands. Smushing his cheeks, seeing his lips pucker, Beatrice let out a deep sigh.

“You are always tormenting Betty.”

“I thought part of our contract was to never let you get bored. Besides, you told me I wasn’t a superman, but…”

“—?”

“When you look at it objectively, I kinda am superhuman, aren’t I?”

With a wink, he smiled at Beatrice. For a moment, Beatrice’s eyes widened, but the next moment her cheeks swelled indignantly.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Let me have a little fun. I’m the kind of guy who does his best work when he gets a little carried away. And…”

As he glanced to the side, he saw a girl standing there indignantly—Ram. Her pink eyes were narrowed, shooting him through, drilling straight into him.

“B-big sis?”

“The thaw came awfully quickly. So it was all just your typical Barusu-esque fuss over nothing.”

“…Effectively, it only took about a day or so, I guess.”

When she put it that way, Subaru couldn’t really offer much more than a wry smile.

In actuality, Subaru had experienced more than twenty deaths, and thinking of the mental load it had taken to accept that as reality, he found it hard to laugh it off as just one day.

But because it was such a difficult thing, he insisted on laughing it off. That was what Natsuki Subaru was supposed to do.

“It’s my long-awaited return. Man of the spring snowmelt, Natsuki Subaru at your service.”

"Hah! All right, then. Say it all you like, but even if I, Ram, in my infinite mercy let it slide…"

"Let it slide? What is this, a water park?!"

"Ukyaaa?!"

Cocking his head at Ram's seemingly meaningful pause, all of a sudden he was hit with a ground dragon's air-splitting tail, sending him and Beatrice flying. Subaru was caught by something soft, and looking up, he saw that Emilia had moved to catch him.

"Patrasche seems *really* happy you're back, too." Emilia giggled.

"Hey, don't lay into me just because you're embarrassed…no, I guess I'm sorry for making you worry, too."

Supported by Emilia, Subaru righted himself and faced Patrasche's sharp gaze. Thinking back to his trusty dragon's unfaltering devotion, even when he had lost his memory…

"You're really always saving me. I love you."

"———"

"…Not going to knock me upside the head this time?"

Unlike every other time he made a lighthearted confession, he wasn't met with Patrasche's ladylike scolding.

"This ground dragon understands when you are joking and when you are serious."

Apparently, they had started getting along at some point, because Beatrice was translating for Patrasche. With the birth of Beatrice the translator, Otto was about to be relieved of duty.

"———"

Rem was riding Patrasche's back, held in place by the reins.

Of course, Subaru couldn't hear a joyous reunion from the sleeping girl's lips. Just seeing her face there made the fiery, roiling emotions in his breast swell.

Were it not for that voice, kicking him in the spine and forcing him to stand tall, he would have been taken in by Louis's sweet nothings in that white space, caught in Gluttony's sinister trick.

She wouldn't let him run away, even if he forgot himself. Which is why he made it back again, through forty deaths.

"But I'll save the wallowing in sentiment for later. Long story short, I've got my memory back. I appreciate everyone wanting to celebrate, but let's settle everything else first."

"That's quite the high evaluation of yourself. I have quibbles regarding that, but there's something else I want to know."

"…Ah, you mean me?"

Snorting at Subaru, Ram looked instead at Emilia. In her eyes was the usual insolence, and an equal measure of discomfort.

It was clear from Beatrice's reaction, too, but Gluttony had inflicted the same injury on Emilia as Julius had suffered. If it turned into a festering, open wound that made her shrink back…

"Right! I'm Emilia. Just Emilia. There's a lot I want to say, but I'm family and heading the same way as you and Beatrice!"

"——"

"If you can understand that much, then I'm fine for now. Now that I know Subaru remembers me, I'm in *reeeally* good spirits."

Emilia flexed her almost pearlescent arms and smiled bravely. In her case, it didn't seem to be a front, either. She really wasn't the least bit worried.

It wasn't just Subaru who thought that. Even Beatrice was taken aback by that bold display. Surprisingly, Ram's eyes widened a bit as well.

"Huh? Did I say something strange?"

"…Nah, not really strange so much as awesomely cool."

Subaru scratched his cheek, and a beat slower, Ram also responded.

"Indeed. Emilia, you said. It is a strange thing. Looking at you, there is an uneasy feeling in the corner of my mind… The same thing happened with Rem…"

"That's…"

"I assume that's because filling the gap left when you disappeared from my mind is just that difficult. It is hard to imagine there being another person like that for me other than Rem, though."

When he saw Ram's eyes narrow, Subaru felt an emotion that was a little out of step with the moment.

Despite what Ram said, it was clear to Subaru just how much she had cared about Emilia, having watched the two of them this past year. But after all that they had built together had been robbed, it was natural for Ram to be suspicious.

"The unease I feel in my head looking at you is the answer to how we are related. So don't worry—I don't like letting debts linger."

"…I'm the same. I will absolutely pay it back."

"Indeed. A billion times over."

"A billion?!"

It was reassuring to see Emilia and Ram share a fearless smile.

When her name was stolen, she should have been isolated after losing all her connections. But she didn't give in to that isolation, holding on tight to the core of her heart. And thanks to that, what should have destroyed her bonds with Subaru and Ram and the others had been neutralized.

And on top of that…

"Barusu, share your plan. Don't think you can undo you blunders just by picking up something you left lying around."

"I know without you telling me, but what a way to put it."

They didn’t need any persuading. He appreciated her willingness to cooperate, since their current predicament was too urgent for them to build up trust, re-form their bonds, and explain the situation in detail for each and every problem they faced.

So…

“We’re going to tear down the big buffet that terrible trio started.”

“Yeah!” “Of course.” “Hah!”

Subaru nodded deeply at the three different responses.

And…

“We got a little scattered along the way, but it’s finally starting to feel like a real homecoming!”

3

“Listen up. This tower is in a bad place. If you want to know exactly how bad, imagine losing all four corners of the board in Othello.”

“That’s…fairly bad.”

Ram’s expression clouded as she listened to Subaru’s exposition. She wasn’t the only one to sink into a grave mood. Emilia and Beatrice had the same reaction upon hearing that.

Othello, also called Reversi in lots of places, used pieces that were white on one side and black on the other on an eight-by-eight board: sixty-four spaces where the players stole others’ pieces back and forth. Subaru had introduced the game to Roswaal Manor quite a while back and inadvertently started a movement. Emilia was a particularly big fan.

In other words, that explanation was enough to instantly convey just how grave the situation was.

“That is outrageous…even for a handicap that’s too much.”

“With that much of a handicap, even I’d have a chance of winning despite being busy as a beaver these days…”

“Now there’s a phrase you don’t hear too often anymore…”

“—! Subaru, say that again.”

“Later. I will later.”

Emilia instantly latched onto Subaru’s standard retort and was understandably disappointed to have her request denied. Feeling a bit guilty, Subaru made a note to say it a lot more later.

Getting out of this situation is top priority. To do that…

“The two Gluttonys and the demon beast stampede. And—”

“Shaula attacking us makes four, I suppose,” Beatrice summarized.

Emilia and Ram fell silent with a complicated look on their faces. It wasn’t unreasonable. The watchtower was being hit by an unprecedented and terrible set of problems. And then Shaula joined the list.

“Someone broke the tower’s rules, and she’s an enemy… Even if she did warn us, that is a tricky situation.”

“But it’s Shaula, right? Is there not any way we can talk to her and explain things? She is *really* attached to Subaru, so if he tried hard to explain things…”

“I would love things to go that peacefully, but it looks like it will be difficult to get her to sit down at the table and negotiate. Though in a sense, she is still attached to me, I guess?”

“Meaning she will come targeting you specifically, Barusu. Good work narrowing down her target.”

It could also be interpreted as aiming for their weakest link, but either way, Subaru agreed with Ram. Having her stubbornly target Subaru was easier to plan around than her slinking around hidden in the tower.

“The silver lining is that, thanks to Beako’s deployments, we’re addressing two of the corners already.”

While Subaru was facing Louis in the corridors of memory, the smart and adorable Beatrice had given directions to the others, working hard to deal with the enemies attacking from the outside.

Thanks to that, Meili was dealing with the stampede, and they had safely gotten Rem out of the green room. Of course, somewhere along the way, they had run into Lye, and Emilia got her name stolen while holding him off so they could escape…

“No, it’s fine. You remember, so I’m fine. Even though you always forget your promises, you still remembered me.”

“What was that little knife in the back all of a sudden?”

“It seems your habits have caught up to you. It appears she understands you well, Subaru. Even if not so well as your Betty.”

“Ladies, ladies, please.”

For just a moment, Subaru got to bask in the feeling of being loved.

“Barusu,” Ram cut in. “You said two corners were dealt with. Meili is holding back the swarm of demon beasts, but what about the second?”

“Julius. He’s in the middle of fighting the enemy on the second floor right now.”

Subaru grabbed his chest and focused on the Lion’s Heart. What Cor Leonis relayed was a light giving off an intense heat on the second floor.

It had already started—Julius and Reid’s rematch.

“In the end, there’s no choice but to settle that once and for all…”

This time, Beatrice had been the one who gave everyone their instructions. But even so, she had reached the same conclusion as

Subaru: Julius had to be the one to face Reid Astrea. From his experience, there was something he understood.

It's aggravating, but turns out there is such a thing as fate.

A steadfast reality that refused to change, no matter what path he took. If that could be called fate, then Subaru, who had repeated the same moments time and time again, had no choice but to believe in its existence.

But while fate might exist, it also embodied a sort of hope. If there was no way to avoid pitting Julius against Reid, then…

"That Reid is an insane product of him taking over Gluttony, but we can leave him to Julius. Everything else is gonna be dedicated to dealing with the last three."

"And that'll be enough, Barusu?"

"—? What is?"

Subaru cocked his head pretty seriously when Ram said that, but seeing that reaction:

"Right," Ram murmured quietly. "I can accept that Barusu is Barusu. I must've lost my touch if I'm relying on your proposals."

"I don't really get it, but it's safe to assume you're insulting me?"

"Eh? No, not at all. It's a compliment. Ram is *really* relying on you, Subaru. Hee-hee, we'll have to do our best."

"…We are going to have to have a talk after this, Emilia," Ram fired back indignantly.

"Okay!" Emilia answered a little happily.

Despite the situation, Emilia was probably enjoying Ram being informal with her. With their bond of lady and maid lost, Ram's treated Emilia more like a friend, or a troublesome little sister. The main reason Subaru had noticed this was because of how unnaturally positive Emilia was being.

"Anyway, that's the situation in the tower! Next is deploying the right people to the right place. That division of forces is Natsuki Subaru's big chance to shine!"

"That's a little too plain…"

"It's plain, but it's an important job! This is the key to a retained, masterful performance. This is a job only I can do…something only I can do! This is my batt… Ow!!!"

"Get on with it already."

Because he was taking too long, Ram slapped him upside the head. Taking a bit of damage from that, Subaru looked to the three people—and the one ground dragon.

"Ready?"

Starting now, it was going to be an all-out fight in the truest sense. The difference between a person and ground dragon was minimal, and Patrasche was usually more help than Subaru anyway.

And adding the newly reformed Super Subaru to the mix, the possibilities were limitless.

“We’re going to win without losing anyone. Since we—”

“Came to this tower to get things back, not lose anything more.” Emilia snapped her fingers.

“Exactly.”

Subaru responded, and then tensing himself…

“First of all is Gluttony. Lye Batenkaitos…I want to leave him to you, Ram.”

“…Of course. Vengeance for Rem. I’ll destroy him.”

Ram put her hands together and answered Subaru’s deployment, but even as she nodded:

“Wait!” Emilia raised her hand. “Lye is the boy from before, right? It would be dangerous for Ram alone. Since she’s…”

“A hornless has her own way of fighting. I’m not going to face him without a plan.”

“Really…? Then how?”

“By adapting on the fly while maintaining a high degree of flexibility.”

“That’s exactly what someone without a plan would say! …Don’t worry, I have a proper idea, too.”

Whether that was Ram’s actual plan or not, Subaru wasn’t going to send her out empty-handed. As the other three turned to look at him, he closed his eyes, and…

“Cor Leonis.”

He called upon the Lion’s Heart again.

It was the odd twinge he had felt while trying to meet up with Beatrice and them, and while he was racing toward Emilia, too. Reaching his hand out toward a closed door.

Cor Leonis meant “Lion’s Heart” in Latin. And Regulus meant…

“…Little King.”

In that moment, a new power awakened in the authority that originated in the Witch Factor of Greed.

There was a warm pulse as he selected Ram right next to him. And then he reached his consciousness out toward the faint, warm light gleaming inside her.

Using a power that should have been impossible, he vowed to support Ram in her fight.

And then something changed…

4

“Barusu.”

“Uergh!”

Now that their meeting was over, they were all headed to their designated locations—or at least that's what Subaru was doing until someone grabbed him by the collar.

Fortunately, there wasn't too much force involved, so he only got strangled just a little.

"W-wow, that's unusual, big sis. You held back to make sure you didn't break me. What's up?"

"It's hard work not to use too much strength when observing an insect in the palm of your hand. This is basically the same… Not that I would let an insect sit in my hand on purpose. What a repulsive thought."

"You're the one who brought it up."

Subaru shrugged at the roundabout statement that was business as usual for Ram. Then he saw Ram open and close her hand, confirming the feeling over and over.

He felt a little odd at seeing that. It was a strange sight for him, since Ram was always so detached and composed. If there was a fitting reward, she could even endure crushing fatigue.

"Authorities…are an absurd power."

He grimaced a bit at her disgruntled comment. After all, he was in complete agreement.

As an Oni who had lost her horn, Ram was constantly paying a terrible price with her body. She had overwhelming skill in combat, but she could only fight for exceedingly brief amounts of time.

Without that limit, she would be the most reliable ally in the tower, by a wide margin. And the ability to remove that limit, with certain conditions, existed in his authority's next stage, the Little King…

"…The role of a king is to shoulder the weight of everyone's problems and feelings."

Lion's Heart and Little King. Cor Leonis was a combination of those two powers. Little King was currently imposing a heavy fatigue and strain on Subaru's body and mind—this was the burden that Ram lived with every day.

Natsuki Subaru's Cor Leonis allowed him to take on the burden of his comrades, as the king of the pride. That was the new power he awakened, and the proof of his resolve to support his friends.

If he was being honest, it made his head hurt. His body was creaking and groaning, and it felt like all his blood had been replaced with burning poison. The joints in his arms and legs were heavy, like they were filled with sand. Ram lived like this every day, and it was worse than he'd imagined.

But if he could become the cornerstone for a new future by doing this…

"I'm coughing up some blood, but we are go for liftoff."

"Fool… If it's just you suffering, then I don't mind very much."

"But this is *our* plan, big sis. If you think of it that way, don't you want to finish this as fast as possible?"

"True. The very idea is revolting."

"That's a bit harsh…"

Ram insulted him as she got adjusted to the effects of this newfound ability. Subaru scratched his head and fought back the nausea as he saw Ram take her familiar pose, holding her elbows.

"Barusu. I won't cut any corners."

Delivering that cold statement ahead of time was Ram being Ram.

It made perfect, of course, but the more she fought at her old strength, the heavier the burden grew. And Subaru was determined to bear the full weight of that burden with his own body.

"That's fine. Don't you dare hold back. I'll know if you're being serious or not from my own agony. Oh, the torture!"

"The better my condition, the more you suffer."

"I feel like I just gave the nuclear football to someone who should never be allowed to hold it," he said with a smile.

Ram's pink eyes crinkled.

"Fool," she murmured, finishing the conversation.

With that small exchange, they reached an understanding. There was a lot he wanted to say, and a lot he should say, but Ram turned away to leave.

And…

"Barusu, be careful. If you die, you won't be able to meet Rem again."

"Yeah, I love you, too."

She wasn't very honest about her concerns, and Subaru cracked wise in response.

Watching Ram run off, Subaru stood with Emilia and the others who were waiting in the passage.

"I'm worried about you, too, but…do you think Ram will be okay?"

"Probably. I'm sure Ram will be fine… If I had said something too stupid, there's no way she wouldn't have said something."

"You really trust Ram, I suppose."

"I trust you, too. And I love you even more. So don't pout."

"Betty isn't pouting!" Beatrice shouted as her cheeks puffed out.

Subaru held her outstretched hand, and Emilia, standing beside them, giggled a little.

"Emilia-tan?"

"No, it's nothing. Just, I felt *really* reassured."

"…What a coincidence. I was just feeling the same."

There was no basis for what Emilia was saying, but it felt like the ultimate boost to Subaru. The anticipation was greater than the unease. It was more reassuring to be entrusted than to simply be left something. Faith was better than dependence. None of their problems had been resolved yet but…

"It's natural to trust your comrades, and when you believe in them, you can believe in yourself. Ever since coming to this sandy tower, this is the brightest things have looked."

"I suppose that face is my favorite version of Subaru."

Beatrice smiled daringly when she saw Subaru's reassuring expression. And Emilia's lovely smile deepened as well.

Noticing that reaction, Beatrice asked, "What is it?"

Emilia shook her head.

"You don't remember, I guess, but I was just thinking the same thing."

5

The massive creature had been caught by the back leg and was mercilessly slammed into the wall. Brute force made possible by a monstrous strength beyond human comprehension caused the large creature to let out a hideous cry. A discordant shriek like countless babies crying split the air.

"——*Giiiiii.*"

The massive, hideous demon beast was knocked away, but the half-human, half-horse gabaou—the ravenous horse lord of the desert—immediately leaped to its feet on the tower's balcony, flames erupting from its mane.

"——"

The next instant, a white flash pierced the torso of the raging gabaou, causing it to swell from the inside. The white light transformed into a torrent of blades, shredding it to pieces.

No matter how monstrous a creature's vitality, it couldn't avoid death when every last one of its internal organs was destroyed at the same time. That ravenous horse-beast was no exception, and it fell gruesomely before the light.

And the woman who did it—Shaula—didn't stop there.

Shaula's battle with the demon beasts was playing out on the fourth floor of the Pleiades Watchtower. The balcony on the outer wall was several hundred yards up in the air, but some of the monsters had wings, and there were many that could easily climb the walls.

As the invaders scaling the wall were swatted down one after the other, the balcony transformed into a sea of blood. Despite the scale of the slaughter, Shaula wasn't even out of breath.

The thought of trying to count the number of monsters storming the tower was enough to drive anyone crazy, but the fact that they were not barreling into the tower already was due to her overwhelming strength.

But the dangerous equilibrium that Shaula was maintaining…

"Shaula!"

"Ghhh, uuuuuugh…!"

A high-pitched voice called her name, but she couldn't respond. She just grimaced and brushed aside the line of flying beasts with her white light.

Red flowers bloomed in midair, and the monsters stopped their follow-up attack. But Shaula was unchanged after driving them back. She cradled her face and stomped the ground.

As she was doing that, peeking through the gap between her fingers, her black eye split, and a red pulse began. A compound eye was developing. A change was happening in Shaula's body.

"Someone… Someone broke the rules…"

Covering her face with her hands, she groaned painfully.

While that was happening, she still shot down the onrushing demon beasts one after the other, but her movements were growing rougher, losing refinement.

"Not good. She's at her limit. Meili! Can—?"

"As you can see, my hands are full, dealing with the flying beasties! If the half-naked lady can't fight anymore, we're going to be really shorthanded!"

"I figured. This is…pretty rough."

Watching Shaula struggle, Echidna—still borrowing Anastasia's body—had a grim look on her face. Meili, who was busy using her blessing to defend the tower, was much the same.

The three of them were holding the tower—though unlike Meili, with her blessing that allowed her to control demon beasts, or Shaula, who brought the real firepower, Echidna couldn't do much herself and was largely on the sidelines.

"But it's getting harder and harder to let it just stay that way…"

Going through what few cards they had to play, she gritted her teeth, watching their lifeline, Shaula.

The change overcoming Shaula was probably caused by something rooted deep inside her. Something she couldn't resist, some sort of limiter. Echidna could recognize it from being in a similar sort of situation as an artificial spirit herself. It wasn't something that determination could change.

If what she had said was true, then someone somewhere inside the Pleiades Watchtower had broken a rule. To correct that, she had to act as the guardian of the tower.

"…Talk about ironic…"

Because she had remained the tower's guardian all this time, she'd managed to reunite with the person she wanted to see most. But because she remained the guardian of the tower, she couldn't disobey the order to hurt the person she wanted to see. The tragedy of a created being.

Echidna had the thought that she and perhaps Beatrice, as fellow created beings, were the only ones who could understand Shaula in the realest sense.

So…

"—Durrrryaaaaa!"

When she saw a figure rush through the passage leading to the balcony with a forceful shout, Echidna gasped as her eyes shot open.

6

The moment he burst onto the balcony, he was stunned by how different it looked, but at the same time, he understood just how intense the fighting here must have been.

"——"

There were dozens of monster corpses, and the balcony was awash in blood.

The reason this vantage point above the sea of sand was stained with blood was because the stampede had not stopped its quixotic charge against the tower. If left alone, they would pour inside, heightening the chaos.

And the one who had done the most to prevent that terrible possibility was…

"Shaula!"

"Master…?"

When Shaula heard his voice, she spun around with wide open eyes—eyes that had split apart, three on each side, for a total of six compound eyes.

It was a transformation Subaru had seen once before. It meant one of the rules of the tower had been broken, and she was switching over to perform her role as guardian of the tower.

As a result, she was turning into a giant scorpion against her will and would soon move to eliminate those challenging the tower—in other words Subaru and his friends. Before that…

"Master, give…give me the order…!"

"——"

"Someone broke the rules. At this rate, I'll…! Before that…if you don't…I'll…Master…!"

Shaula clawed at her body as she pleaded with Subaru. She had somehow lost the ability to kill herself. What she was asking for was the final push she needed to do it: an order from Subaru.

Subaru looked into her compound eyes and nodded vigorously.

"How many times do I have to tell you, I don't know what I did to make you call me 'Master.'"

"Ngh!"

Despair filled Shaula's compound eyes.

Rejected by the person she had waited four hundred long years for, and her final plea kicked aside, Shaula cowered like a child.

Watching her through that, Subaru inhaled and exhaled.

"But we can save whether you get to call me that for a later date."

"Huh…?"

"I'm not going to tell you to kill yourself. I'm not going to leave you crying there. And this isn't how I'm going to end your four-hundred-year wait."

When he gathered up all the memories he'd lost, Subaru realized something.

The people in this world were all too patient. No one should wait faithfully for four hundred years. Someone had to grab them by the scruff of their necks and drag them out.

"And I'll do it, too! I'm not gonna be someone else's puppet!" Subaru raised his fist. "Bring it on, fate!"

"———"

Shaula was speechless. Inside her, something exploded, and she knew she wouldn't be able to hold it back any longer.

But in that instant, what was most important for her wasn't the tower's rules or the impulses swelling up inside her.

"Master… I love you…"

It was the irrepressible love she felt for the person she had waited four hundred years to meet again.

After she said that, her transformation began in earnest.

Her pale, slender hands swelled into pincers, her voluptuous body burst, and then, like a tape rewinding, the flesh and blood returned, forming a new body. A black shell came into being, and red compound eyes glared out at the world. Multiple legs thrust into the ground as the tower's manager became complete…

"———*Sssssss.*"

There was a screech from the scorpion, warning of death to all who infringed on the tower's rules.

Her eyes gleamed monstrously, and her tail's stinger flashed white, pointed at the black-haired boy she had been so devoted to…

"—Hiiyah!!!"

A heavy kick right in the side sent the scorpion flying. The force was so great, it plowed into various monsters on the balcony before flying over the edge and down into the sea of sand.

"Murak!"

To top it off, mana with imbued directionality warped the natural laws of the world, stealing the mass of the several-hundred-pound giant scorpion, leaving it to blow in the breeze like a leaf.

Murak was a type of shadow magic that manipulated the mass of its target. Having lost its natural weight, thanks to that, the scorpion fell without any means of coming back. As a final bit of resistance, it turned its stinger on the balcony, taking aim at them, but…

"Winged molesies, go!"

The girl's high-pitched order summoned several winged monsters that immediately barreled down on the scorpion.

Grotesque mole-like monsters with bird wings and most of their heads transformed into horns, they charged into the scorpion's shell one after the other, sending the newly lightweight scorpion down to the ground all at once from the impact.

Falling several hundred yards—that obviously wouldn't be enough to defeat it, but it was enough to buy some time. And using that time:

"Meili! Echidna!" Subaru shouted as he ran over.

"Natsuki! You're up…no?" Looking up, Echidna furrowed her brow. "Did you manage to get your memory back?"

"You're quick on the uptake! But how could you tell?"

"It's easy enough with Beatrice there next to you, looking so proud."

Echidna jerked her chin toward Beatrice, who was looking smug while holding his hand.

True, it's definitely easy to tell something good happened from that smug look. It really is lovely.

"And that girl I can't recall who kicked Shaula off is…"

"You can thank Gluttony's authority. The same thing happened to Julius… Forgotten by everyone else, but she remembers herself. Her name is Emilia. My tough and cute princess."

"Thanks for the quick update. You mind if I ask what the plan is now?"

"Yeah, I just so happen to have an answer to that question."

While Subaru nodded deeply, Emilia hurried to help Meili deal with the demon beasts. While they were buying time, he prioritized sharing his plan with his wise comrade.

"Echidna, your role is inside. Go meet up with Julius, fighting on the second floor! I already talked with Emilia about what to do after that!"

"………" Echidna thought for just a moment. "I don't mind going with her, but what about the rest of you?"

"Betty's and Subaru's roles are already set," Beatrice immediately responded. Glancing over at Subaru, she squeezed his hand. "We will face that giant scorpion here. We have to hold back enough not to exterminate it, though. This is going to be a pain."

"She talks a big game, don't she? That's my Beako."

"Eh-heh-bleh."

Spurring herself and her contractor on with that bold declaration, Beatrice stuck out her tongue.

Eyes widening at their exchange, Echidna sighed and shifted gears. That pragmatic, adaptive ability was just what he would expect from Anastasia's partner.

"No point doubting your plan now. I guess I'll go with it."

"I'm honored. It's such a shame you had to have the name 'Echidna.'"

"I've already accepted your wholehearted grudge against my maker. Any messages for Julius?"

After a bit of banter, Echidna started to turn, but not before asking one final question.

Julius was at this moment fighting on the upper floor. When he thought about it, Subaru realized that Julius was the last comrade he had not met up with and explained that his memory was back, but…

"No, nothing special."

There was nothing that Subaru needed to say to Julius, who was fighting Reid.

Julius was already in the place he wanted him to be. He could tell from Cor Leonis.

"—The me a little before this and the me before that already said everything that needed saying. There's nothing more to add. He's Julius Juukulius."

There was a steadfast fate in this world, and there was no avoiding a decisive clash between Julius and Reid. But something being unavoidable didn't make it insurmountable. If it was fate that Reid would stand in Julius's way, then there was just one answer.

Julius Juukulius would be the one to cut down Reid Astrea.

"…Got it. I'll tell him just the way you said it."

"Ah, there is one thing, actually. Tell him people are fighting all around the tower, so finish up quick and come help the others."

With a wave, Subaru got a little laugh out of Echidna as she started moving. Seeing her off, Subaru looked to Emilia, who slashed two demon beasts with an ice sword.

"Emilia-tan! Just like we planned! I'm counting on you!"

"Leave it to me! Don't die, Subaru!"

"Aye-aye!"

Subaru raised his fist with a bit more actual feeling than usual at her natural warning.

He didn't want to die. That fundamental principle was unchanged, but there was even more meaning in it, too. Dying and returning in this situation would be unimaginably dangerous.

If the restart point was unchanged, then he would go back to before he had peeled Louis out of himself. It was impossible to guess what sort of problems might happen then. Would the Louis inside him be gone, or not? The corridors of memory was sort of a lawless gray zone, but how would it interact with Return by Death? There was no obvious answer.

In other words…

"Let's settle it this time!"

On his cue, Emilia followed Echidna off the balcony.

Them to their battlefield, and us to ours.

"So? That was a bunch of gibberish instead of an explanation. Do you plan on giving me a real one eventually or what?"

Meili had restrained herself and not interrupted, but she ran over as Emilia and Echidna left. Subaru flashed her a thumbs-up.

"Sorry, but roll with me, Meili. You, me, and Beako are going to take care of two corners. The demon beast stampede and the giant scorpion!"

"That isn't an explanation at all!"

"—It's coming!"

Meili's hair swayed, and she pouted, but there was no time to give her a more detailed explanation. The next moment, as if responding to Beatrice's voice, something massive leaped onto the balcony from the tower's wall.

A creature sporting a black shell, lethal pincers, and red compound eyes…

"A four-hundred-year shut-in."

His breath rising a bit, Subaru lifted Beatrice in his arms, and, standing next to Meili, he faced off with the giant scorpion.

"It's a battle of the shut-ins. In that corner is a person with four hundred years' experience, and in our corner are two people with four hundred and one years' experience."

"Don't you mean three people with four hundred and two years' experience?"

"In other words, we're the winners."

"Beyond the word *winner*, I have to wonder what you are talking about!"

Beatrice roared at the two of them from within Subaru's arms. Slightly more relaxed after that bit of banter, Subaru stared at the scorpion and exhaled.

With this, all the matchups are perfect. All that's left is…

"I'm begging you here, Emilia-tan. You're the key to everything."

The battle of the four corners enveloping the entire Pleiades Watchtower was beginning in earnest.

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The giant scorpion was the one to fire the first shot of the chaotic struggle.

"———"

Its red compound eyes blazed, and a white flash erupted from its tail that swung upward the next moment.

Subaru had a lot of bad memories involving that deadly flash. Without putting too fine a point on it, he remembered that around half of the fifteen repeated attempts he had gone through in the tower had ended because of it.

But after getting killed that many times, he had learned a couple things. For one…

"The sign of an attack, and its velocity…!"

The compound eyes and the tail, their light increased just slightly the moment the scorpion attacked.

It was so minute as to seem like imagination, but Subaru had staked his life several times and had painstakingly won that knowledge and that slenderest of lifelines through trial and error.

"Sorry I couldn't live up to your expectations!"

He apologized to the other him who wanted an all-powerful Natsuki Subaru when all he could manage was this crude style of fighting. But in his arms, Beatrice, who was facing the same deadly challenge with him, snorted.

"What are you saying? You've never failed to live up to my expectations."

Beatrice said the nicest things. And at the same time, she raised her tiny hand that wasn't holding on to Subaru's and cast a spell.

"Murak."

Freed from the yoke of gravity, the two of them soared above the point where the white light passed through, floating up above the balcony.

"Meili!"

"I know, I know!"

Subaru floated higher in a burst, blown by the explosion of the flash. Beside him, weightless from the spell, too, Meili whistled on her fingers. Just above them, the winged moles latched on to their prey, as if to kidnap them up into the sky. With a sudden acceleration, the three of them leaped out into the air over the sands.

This was another thing he had learned in those fifteen deaths. The scorpion wasn't to be faced in a cramped space. Whether fighting or fleeing, it was suicide to face it outside of a wide-open area…

"But even so, this is a pretty suicidal move, too…!"

Hanging beneath demon beasts, they descended more than a hundred yards in one fell swoop. Battered by the intense, sandy wind, they heard a loud, rushing sound in their ears as they descended at full speed toward the desert. If Subaru had been afraid of heights, just the attempt alone might well have killed him.

"Mister!"

"Wha-gaaah?!"

Just barely catching Meili's voice in the torrent of wind, he felt an impact. Looking up, he saw that something had pierced the winged mole's body. The small monster exploded from the inside out, spraying chunks of flesh, and sent Subaru and Beatrice flying out into space. A follow-up attack by the scorpion was the cause.

Left behind on the balcony, it had taken aim at them in their descent. Readying the next terrifyingly precise attack, it shifted its gaze to Subaru. His instincts cried out that it would hit if he didn't do anything. Subaru immediately hugged Beatrice tightly to him:

"Beako! Original Spell Number Two!"

It was a card he could only play three times in one day, but he couldn't afford to die because he screwed up the timing.

Power swelled in Beatrice's eyes as she came to the same conclusion herself and prepared a a spell that would make Subaru invulnerable for a limited time…

"———*Giiiiii.*"

"Whoa?!" "Whah?!"

Just before the spell activated, Subaru and Beatrice were snatched up, and an instant later, white light passed through the spot where they had been standing, just barely missing them.

"Ph-phew. What happened…ugh?!"

Held by something that felt almost rubbery, Subaru looked around to see what had happened, only to shout in surprise. Beatrice, who he held close to his chest, had the same wide-eyed reaction.

What had saved them from the scorpion's attack was a demon beast with bluish-black skin and a vicious appearance, that had galloped down the outer wall of the tower—a gabaou.

"Gah-ga-ha-ha-ha! When I saw you for the first time underground, I never would have guessed I'd be fighting alongside you in the climax!"

"______*Giiiiii.*"

The gabaou whinnied in that earsplitting shriek as Subaru put on a brave front. It placed Subaru and Beatrice on its back, and then accelerated even faster, running down the tower.

"Oh, ohhhhhhh?!"

"Wabababababababa?!"

The gabaou ran straight down, its body swaying right and left as it went, and each time it did, Subaru and Beatrice let out a shriek as a white flash just barely grazed them.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, they reached the end of the line, and a powerful impact shook both of them. The ravenous horse lord had run down the entire tower, landing in the desert.

"Th-that was unbearable. That was more nightmarish than an actual nightmare…"

"Argh! You two were about to use your trump card right at the start, right? Be more careful!"

Having survived that grand experience, they were met by Meili riding another gabaou.

He had to tip his cap to Meili, who had taken control of the high-power gabaou, flying winged moles, and sandworm underground, all while holding off the stampede.

That ability to adapt and the breadth of her tactics were exactly what he wanted out of a partner right now.

"Meili! You and me might make a pretty good team!"

"Uwah, stop it. I don't want Petra to be mad at me later."

Meili wholeheartedly rejected Subaru's praise with a grimace.

Hmm, she doesn't look so good.

On closer inspection, he noticed her wipe the sweat off her brow, and her breathing was a little ragged. Not just because she was focused on a life-or-death fight, either.

"Otto joked about the world being hell when he couldn't control his blessing, but…looks like it can be real bad if you overuse it, too."

The comment Otto had let slip one time when he was drunk was something that Subaru might have to pay closer attention to.

If what Otto said was right, then there was a limit on how much he could just rely on Meili in this battle. If she collapsed in the middle of the fighting, they would have their backs against the wall in an instant.

"This battle is gonna come down to how much we can pamper

Princess Meili!”

“That sounds like a plan Betty can’t let pass without comment!”

“Well, if you can make it easier on me, that would be nice…but we can’t just win by running away, right?” Meili remarked with a sour look.

“Yeah.” Subaru nodded. “We can’t do anything about Shaula…that big scorpion, if we are just stalling. That’s why Emilia-tan holds the key to everything.”

“…That silver-haired lady from before?” Meili asked, unconvinced.

“That’s right. Emilia-tan and the fifth rule are the key to it all.”

Nodding, Subaru held out his hand with five fingers raised. Each one was a rule of the tower placed on them, the challengers.

“No leaving until the examination is complete. The examination’s rules cannot be broken. Disrespecting the archive is not permitted. The tower must not be destroyed. And…”

Meili had heard the first four rules already. But no one other than Subaru knew the fifth rule. No one other than Subaru had forced it out of her in another iteration, even though she had hidden it so earnestly.

The fifth rule that she had held back, not telling anyone was…

“The destruction of the examination is not forbidden. Meaning this tower’s rules can be nullified.”

The examination restricted the challengers’ movements, but at the same time, Shaula was also bound as an examiner. So even if they wanted to avoid killing Shaula, they still had to play by the rules.

But if that was the chain that had bound her these four hundred years…

“—! She’s coming!”

Right after Beatrice’s warning, a tremendous cloud of sand erupted before their eyes. A shock wave caused by the giant scorpion not racing down the tower but leaping directly from the balcony without any hesitation.

From the depths of the cloud, there was a creaking sound as the pincers opened and closed.

The scorpion slowly came into view, its eyes ignoring all the demon beasts surrounding the tower and focused purely on the three of them—no, just on Subaru.

“Beako! Meili! We have to buy time! Emilia-tan is our win condition!”

“Roger!”

“When you say *time,* how long, exactly, is that supposed to be?”

“As fast as Emilia-tan can take care of it.”

Emilia was always earnest and serious. So there was no way she would hold back or compromise. She poured her all, every bit of energy she could muster, into everything she did.

Loving, caring for, and trusting in her, he would hold his ground here.

"Now, let's do this. We'll crush fate—no, the system of this tower!"

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"I see, so that's why you—"

"Yes! That's right! That's what Subaru said. If I go to the very top of the tower, I'm sure to find something that can turn this around!"

Briskly answering, Emilia accelerated while carrying Echidna.

At first, they had run alongside each other, but Emilia started getting impatient and picked her up at some point. Echidna didn't stop her. It was certainly faster this way, but…

"Shouldn't you avoid overexerting yourself? The first floor is unknown territory, right?"

"Eh? Ah, you don't need to worry about me! Anastasia's body is *really* light, and it isn't any different with you inside her. This is easy-peasy!"

"Because me being here has no difference on Ana's weight…no, that's not what's important."

Echidna's eyes narrowed as she studied the unfamiliar beauty.

Emilia's name had been stolen by Gluttony's authority. Her situation should be the same as Julius's, but she hadn't lost heart. Was that simply due to her natural resilience?

Or was that how big a difference it was to have someone who supported her?

Emilia had said it herself. She wasn't worried because Subaru remembered her. It was a terribly simple and even romantic sort of phrase, but at the same time, it felt like there was a truth to it. It was unclear why Subaru seemed to be outside the effects of Gluttony's authority.

More precisely, it wasn't as if he didn't experience any effect, either, though, since him losing his memories was caused by Gluttony.

So she couldn't write off all of it as just Subaru's unique position. So there might have been a way. Some method to protect memories and names. If that was possible, Anastasia and Julius…

"______"

What made Julius and Emilia different, even though they were placed in the same situation? The difference was having a person at their side. Was it not having a person at their side who tried to support them?

Could Julius have avoided collapse if he'd had support? Maybe if it was someone who was like what Subaru was to Emilia?

"I…"

Echidna didn't have an answer to what she should do.

It was enough to make her wonder if this was the most she had ever racked her brain in her entire life as a hollow artificial spirit.

"Echidna?"

"…It's nothing. More importantly, is it true? That you made it through the second floor examination…through Reid Astrea's violence?"

"Mmm, it is. Argh, but if you've forgotten that, too, then explaining it will be *really* hard."

Emilia's cheeks swelled adorably, but it surprised Echidna to hear that this girl had gotten through the examination of that man who was violence incarnate.

It was hard to imagine she would lie in this scenario. Even in this short time, she could tell that Emilia wasn't the type likely to lie, so it must be true.

"In which case, what evidence is there that things can be resolved by going up to the top of the tower?"

"Subaru said he heard the tower's fifth rule from Shaula. He mentioned it would solve things after he thought about a lot of different stuff, so I'm sure it's right."

"That's some pretty blind trust…"

"If doubting it would make things better, then I would, but I think there are times it doesn't help… You trusted Subaru, too, since you came with me, right?"

There wasn't a single doubt in those eyes looking at her, and faced with that, Echidna couldn't respond. Seeing that, Emilia suddenly broke into a smile.

"See, my knight is a *really* hard worker."

Emilia was proud that his efforts were being acknowledged, and Echidna also felt a bit of an out-of-place emotion, clutching Anastasia's chest and exhaling.

"———"

She told herself that that emotion was dangerous. It was incredibly illogical and out of place. At the very least, it wasn't something to be feeling in this moment right now. If possible, she would prefer to forget it forever, but even if she couldn't, then at least right now…

"—And that Subaru is counting on me!"

She was jealous of the girl who could believe so wholeheartedly in herself, and in the person who stayed so close to her.

She should forget this moment and focus on resolving this situation.

“——”

Emilia’s long legs spun gracefully as they raced up the stairs to the second floor by leaps and bounds. And after she made it through that staircase that should have been so long, there was a tremendous silver flash and sparks flying.

Before them, covering their entire field of vision, unfolding left, right, and all around, was a knight with light purple hair fluttering and a white uniform stained by blood—Julius Juukulius.

And facing him…

“Ghh, kah!”

“Oraoraoraora! You think that’s enough to do anything? Don’t look down on me. Did you come here to play? If you wanna play, then put on some makeup. Do that and I’ll bully you as much as you want!”

With a vulgar mouth, Reid Astrea, the manifestation of violence unleashing nightmarish attacks with the two sticks in his hands, was performing a dance of death all across the stage of the second floor.

It was a struggle beyond normal human comprehension, but sadly, even to an amateur, it was clear at a glance that Julius was in the worse position.

“That’s enough.”

What interrupted the two swordsmen was a clear, mellifluous voice. But in contrast to the voice, the way she burst into the fight was stirring and heroic. Echidna was speechless at that incredible scene.

“Huh?”

Reid looked overhead with a dubious sneer, and Julius’s eyes widened in silence.

The object that unfolded over their heads was a massive icicle large enough to cover the whole ceiling. That mass of destruction that could splinter even a dragon cart in an instant crashed down at the two of them.

In an instant, Reid and Julius had completely opposite reactions. Julius leaped aside to avoid the oncoming hunk of ice, and Reid just grinned.

“Hah!!!”

With a feral grin, he thrust a single chopstick at the falling hunk of ice.

It stalled for just an instant. The chopstick bent, and just before it broke, Reid stepped down firmly against the floor. Transmitting the force of that through the chopstick into the ice, both the chopstick and the ice shattered.

“…You’ve done it now.”

Shards of ice scattered all around as Reid turned. When his one blue eye was fixed straight at Emilia, who was pointing her palms at him, her cheek tensed.

"Rarin' to fight, huh? I don't hate that in a woman, but…ah?! The hell?! You're hot as hell! A total babe! What's a doll like you doin' in the middle of this desert?! C'mon, come be my doll."

"Sorry for interrupting," she said with a soft expression. "But Julius has to win against you…"

"Say what?"

Reid's forehead warped when he heard that, but Julius, who had been saved by her, looked even more perplexed. She was an unfamiliar person to him, and his handsome brow furrowed when he heard her trust in him.

"I can see that you're here to help, but…Echidna, who is she?"

"It's a bit hard for me to explain, too. But in short, she's someone in the same position as you."

"What…?"

Julius looked fixedly at Emilia again, upon hearing that. And then he realized that not being able to remember such an absurdly distinctive person was all he needed to know.

"Silver-haired, purple-eyed elf…are you?"

"Yes. I *reeeally* get how you feel right now, Julius."

"Then it is…"

As one of two people whose names had been stolen by Gluttony, he immediately understood the situation. Standing with Emilia and Echidna behind him, he turned his knight's sword on Reid again.

"If you are in the same position, then that is enough to acknowledge you as an ally. I am grateful for your aid earlier. However, I do not understand your words. You said I must defeat him…"

"I think Reid knows the answer to that."

Julius's eyes narrowed at Emilia's confident response. However, before he could probe further, there was a frustrated voice.

Reid cocked his head, tapping the patch over his right eye wildly.

"Oy, oy, what are you, babe? Why can't I stop you? It's not like I suddenly fell head over heels, so… Did you already clear the damn examination?!"

"Yes, that's right! You touched my chest with a chopstick and lost!"

"Kah! Talk about a satisfying way to lose. Shame I can't remember it!"

That all he could do was gnash his teeth a bit was proof that the shackles that bound him no longer restrained Emilia. In other words, there was nothing on the second floor stopping Emilia…

"Julius, I…"

"Go, beautiful lady, who is just like me, whose name I do not know."

Unsure of what to say, Emilia faltered a moment, but Julius interrupted her, pointing his knight's blade toward the stairs. Julius smiled gallantly at her quiet, stunned face.

"You have your own role, and it is not to aid me. This is enough. Be well."

"…You too!"

With Julius's encouragement, Emilia nodded and started running. Reid couldn't stop her sprint. She raced to the innermost area of the floor where the stairs leading up continued. Stopping in front of them, she turned around.

"My name is Emilia. Just Emilia. Let's meet again after all this!"

Leaving her name with them, Emilia raced gallantly up the stairs. Watching her leave, Echidna let out a long, deep breath.

Emilia's job was to continue upward. And Echidna's role was…

"You will remain to watch my battle?"

"If you'll allow it… No, that's not it. I'm staying because I've decided that I should."

"———"

"Not because I can do anything, but because this is what Ana would do if she were here. My place in this tower is untenable. So I at least want to stand behind you, of my own volition. Since…"

She looked at Julius's face, his lips pursed tightly, and then continued.

"…Since you're Anastasia Hoshin's knight. Isn't that right?"

It took an incredible amount of courage to believe something that didn't feel real.

Compared to believing in something with a physical presence, she had no idea how much strength was enough to feel confident believing in something that couldn't be confirmed.

However, believing in that indefinite thing, Echidna kept her eyes right on his back.

Julius looked down with his long eyelash-rimmed eyes. He took a long, deep breath…

"That is surprisingly reassuring. Someone mustering the courage to believe in me, to have expectations of me, when I might as well be a stranger to them."

"Julius…"

To Julius, the ground beneath him was unsteady.

To Echidna, the bond she should have known was unclear.

Relying on something so unreliable, the two of them had to rely on a bond besides the one they should have already had, but in this moment, at least, they were indeed seeing the same thing.

So…

"Julius, I have a message for you."

"A message?"

"Yes. 'People are fighting all around the tower, so finish up quick and come help the others.'"

"———"

Knowing that Subaru had meant it as an encouragement, in his own way, Echidna shared the message with Julius word for word. In response, Julius's slender shoulders tensed just a little bit.

He mulled over the message, taking it in. The reaction was clear and dramatic.

"Hah."

It was short, almost like a sharp breath. But it wasn't that.

It was a laugh. A single laugh from the depths of his stomach. And if there had been anyone who knew Julius there, they would have been stunned.

Julius Juukulius laughing in the middle of a battle was unthinkable.

"If he has broken from his shell, then I cannot allow myself to lose, either."

It was quiet, but there was an intense emotion dwelling in that resolution.

Raising his knight's sword in front of himself, Julius faced his enemy. Reid had been looking bored for a while, but suddenly he grinned, like a shark.

"You ready to do this?"

"How rude. I am at all times serious in the face of battle."

"That ain't what I mean. You get it even if I don't spell it, don't ya?"

Still smirking, Reid raised his left hand and flipped up the eye patch covering his eye. Revealing a second blue eye that seemed perfectly healthy, the man who stood at the pinnacle of swordsmanship greeted his challenger with open bloodlust.

His sheer presence was so powerful, so palpable, that it seemed like it could kill a more timid man. But Julius faced those gleaming eyes head-on. Behind him, Echidna endured it as well, even as her body went stiff.

When he confirmed that Julius had stood his ground, Reid bared his fangs.

"Stick Swinger Reid. Remember that name, as you die."

"———"

In battle, to exchange names before crossing swords was evidence that a warrior had been acknowledged as an equal.

There was no telling how seriously Reid took that practice, but Reid's thoughts aside, it had a dramatic impact on his challenger.

Exhaling and controlling his racing heart, Julius responded in kind.

"Allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Julius Juukulius. Knight of Anastasia Hoshin, candidate for the royal selection of the Kingdom of Lugunica— My pretense as a nameless knight ends here."

As if engraving himself into the very world, he spoke his name with pride.

9

Leaving Julius and Echidna, Emilia raced up the stairs.

She moved her long legs single-mindedly, going up two, sometimes three stairs with each step at an extraordinary speed. But in her heart, she focused on going faster, even faster.

She gritted her teeth as she ran. Her desperation showed on her beautiful face.

She was worried about the two she'd left below on the second floor. Reid was extremely strong and violent, and he had a nasty mouth. Her two friends might get hurt physically or emotionally.

Of course, she wasn't just worried about Julius and Echidna. She was concerned about Subaru, Beatrice, and Meili trying to hold off Shaula. And she wondered if Ram would be able to fulfill her role. Would Patrasche be able to protect Rem? Did she have to rebuild her bonds with everyone from the beginning again because her name had been eaten? There was no end to those concerns, and it honestly made her want to stop and cry.

But she couldn't stop. And she couldn't cry. She held back the sniffle that lingered in the back of her nose.

"Because nothing is over yet…!"

Having people who trusted her and believed in her was what kept Emilia going right now. There were lots of concerns, lots of things worrying her, but she was filled with faith that surpassed all that.

"Ghh! There's light!"

Up ahead, Emilia's purple eyes caught a glimpse of a white light. It was the end of these long, long steps leading into the unknown first floor.

With that thought, she launched herself forward and accelerated even further.

"I made it!"

Tearing through the light, Emilia finally reached the end of the stairs. What lay before her…was not a space that could be called the first floor.

"Huh…?"

Dumbfounded, Emilia let out a surprised sound as she came to a stop. What greeted her wasn't the continuation of the familiar watchtower.

The walls were nowhere to be seen, and there was no ceiling. An awe-inspiring blue sky spread overhead. Emilia wasn't standing inside the building, but outside it. After coming up the stairs from the second floor, Emilia emerged on the roof of the tower.

"Is the first floor outside…? This is…higher up than the clouds, even…"

The top of the tower was vast, and there didn't seem to be any railings. If she went to the edge, she should be able to look straight down.

The tower was touching the clouds that should have been far above it, and Emilia caught her breath, realizing that she was inside the clouds, or even above them.

It was her first time reaching such a high place, but after that surprise, something else entirely caught her attention.

"———"

"…Oh…"

It was quiet, and almost too magnificent, so she had failed to notice its presence.

Emilia, who had been completely focused on her location and the clouds, was slow to notice the being standing at the edge of her vision. She slowly turned around and let out a gasp.

Even with the despair of having her name stolen and being forgotten by the world threatening to overcome her, Emilia had held on in the final refuge of her heart, steeling herself for whatever may come. But nothing could have prepared her for this.

That was just how unexpected this sight was.

Because…

"You're…"

"—Thou who hath reached the tower's peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor."

There was a solemn, deep voice that seemed to echo directly in her soul. Emilia realized her voice was trembling.

Who could blame Emilia for being faint of heart? No one. It was impossible. Because all beings had no choice but to kneel in that being's presence.

Because its name was—

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."

The Holy Dragon Volcanica—its massive body covered in blue, gleaming scales—looked down on Emilia with a presence that could blow away her very soul with a single breath.

Outside the tower, the fight between Natsuki Subaru and friends and the Shaula-transformed-giant-scorpion began.

On the tower's second floor, the grinning instrument of mass destruction, Reid Astrea, renewed his duel with Julius.

On the tower's first floor, Emilia had an unexpected encounter with the massive being waiting there.

And in the spiral staircase connecting the tower's fourth through sixth floors…

"Ahhh, sheesh! We went out of our way to steal it, but this is something we can't really use, isn't it?!" The boy spat in irritation.

Scratching his long brown hair as he scoffed, he lowered his hand that held a beautifully detailed sword made of ice.

He had re-created the power using the name he had stolen, but the mana control was more precise than it looked, and it was difficult to combine with other memories.

Significant effort and skill was required to combine the techniques of different people, and Louis and Roy were not very good at it.

"Well, we are superior, so we can make it work, though."

Though all three siblings possessed Gluttony's authority, they all used it in slightly different ways. As a self-styled gourmet, Lye had more than a few choice words about the way his younger siblings comported themselves. Strength was what gave birth to a sense of superiority. Not that he was one to give advice.

"Plus, there's no getting through to cute little Louis or that jerk Roy…well, that's just how it goes! If they're saying they can't do it, then so be it! We'll lap up every delicious treat in this tower for ourselves! Yes, yes, right, exactly, great, yes, YES! Gluttony! Gluttony!"

He bit clean through the ice sword in his hands, revealing his sharp teeth. Gluttony—Lye Batenkaitos—resolved to serve up every last target inside the tower on his dinner plate.

Fortunately, he could understand the situation intuitively. All that remained was to decide the order of the courses and which should be the main dish…

"And you believe you have that right? So carefree."

"———"

That voice had come from somewhere higher up on the stairs. Lye stopped chewing on the ice and raised his head. Above him, who stood on the stairs spanning the fourth and fifth floors but Ram. She stood on the fourth floor and peered down on him with her pink eyes.

The same color as blood or flames, her eyes held a terribly cold intensity, looking pitifully down at Lye's ferocious hunger.

"From what I've heard, you are the one responsible for sundering my and Rem's sisterly love… Be sure to squeal like a stuck pig as you die.”

CHAPTER 5

MENTAL DEATH

1

After covering his mouth with cloth to keep out the sand, Subaru took a deep breath.

If he was being honest, he would have liked some goggles, too, but unfortunately, that was asking too much. He had no choice but to steel himself to the sand flying into his eyes as he kept staring into the center of the dust devil.

"Beako! Meili! Hold on!"

"I know!" "You're such a hard taskmaster!"

Cutting through the sand that blurred their vision was a deadly being clad in a pitch-black carapace.

If it was allowed to get close, a single strike from its pincers would be lethal. If it was kept at a distance and given enough space to unleash its stinger, it would be lethal. And there were a lot more potentially lethal combinations.

There were enough lose conditions to stock a shop and then some.

"But don't even think of giving up! There being a wealth of ways to lose is nothing new!"

"Is this the time for that?! Argh! Go for it, gaba-pony!"

Listening to Subaru's unreliable shout, Meili gave an order to the demon beasts.

The centaur-like monsters let out a shriek like a baby's cry, and the two creatures ran into the desert at full speed, one carrying Meili and the other carrying Subaru and Beatrice.

And clinging to their tails as they furiously kicked off the sand was the giant scorpion, kicking up a sandstorm with its skittering legs.

"*—Sssssss!*"

As expected, at long range, it aimed to end their lives with its stinger, and up close, it came swinging with its pincers. Maintaining just the right distance, they continued to deal with its attacks.

Compared to the list of lose conditions, their singular win condition was stalling until something changed. They were waiting for

Emilia to clear the first floor of the tower and destroy the rules that had been set.

In truth, he wasn't even sure it was actually possible, but…

"I suppose if it wasn't, the rules set for the tower wouldn't make any sense."

"Exactomundo, Beako. Telling us in advance in the rules that it's okay to abuse the system means that the rules are meant to be broken."

And if that was possible, then it would be something granted as a reward for the person who cleared the tower. Given that, it would be a privilege only bestowed upon those who cleared it in the proper way.

It was massively helpful that Emilia had beaten Reid straight up in his test. If she had not, they wouldn't have even a chance of saving Shaula.

"I'm never forgiving that asshole for what he did to Emilia-tan, though…!"

It still pissed him off just thinking about it, but Julius would be the one to give Reid his just deserts. Looking forward to him beating that sexual harasser black-and-blue, Subaru kept the tall tower in his sights and entrusted himself to Beatrice's and Meili's hard fighting.

"———"

The sensations from Cor Leonis, particularly Ram's, were an ongoing concern.

He was confident he had sent everyone to the best place for them, but Ram's fight, in particular, was one he expected to be especially hard from the start. Both because her opponent was Lye Batenkaitos, the villain who had turned Rem into a sleeping beauty, and also because of Ram's condition.

Only a perfect Ram would be able to handle Lye Batenkaitos. And he wanted Ram to wipe the floor with Lye. That was why he needed to shoulder the burden that always tormented her.

Which was all the more reason…

"It would be really bad if we get too far away from the tower and the authority cuts out! Sorry for adding so many limitations, but please work with me!"

"——! When this is over, I swear I'm gonna… Argh!"

Meili pursed her lips pursed as her face reddened.

While the tamer grumbled, Subaru kept a tight hold on Beatrice as he clung to the monster's back…

"I'm counting on you, Emilia-tan… Me and these two girls will buy as much time as we can!"

High above the sands, at the same time as Subaru made his prayer.

Subaru had anticipated the first floor's examination would be as difficult a challenge as all the others, but even with his imagination, he would never have predicted the being Emilia would encounter or the situation she would be placed in.

There was no one in Lugunica, no one in the world who didn't know its name.

If the Witch of Jealousy was a symbol of terror, then this was a symbol of hope and trust. That was a testament to how much this being had achieved.

The grand and enormous being's name was…

"Holy Dragon Volcanica."

Repeating the name that it had spoken, Emilia felt her body turn suddenly cold.

It felt like she couldn't even breathe without permission. That was the force of a true dragon's presence. It held the whole world in its grasp.

"———"

Inhaling, Emilia looked up at Volcanica's body again.

The scales bathed in a deep blue color gleamed like jewels, and each seemed as sharp as a masterwork sword. Its thick front and back legs had black, boulder-like claws, and its face, which resembled a ground dragon's, gave the impression of an ancient being. It had golden eyes that had seen an unbelievable length of time. Its head had two large, thick horns that sharply pierced the heavens.

The Holy Dragon's body was maybe fifty feet or so long. It was hard to say for sure, because it was hunched over, with its wings and tail furled. However, being that big without standing up, it couldn't be contained inside the building, which made perfect sense.

The first floor must have been constructed outside specifically for Volcanica.

"…Uh…ummm, Volcanica! I came to take the examination! The first floor's examination! I'm here to challenge it!"

"———"

"I don't know how difficult it will be, but…but I am in a really big hurry, so please! If I don't do my best, it will be a problem for Subaru and the others. So whatever it is, bring it on!"

Slapping her cheeks with both hands, Emilia stopped herself from cowering.

"I'm used to people grading me. There are people who hate me for being a half-elf, and people like Echidna, who can be a little mean, but…but there are also people who put their faith in me, too, like Subaru and Ram and Beatrice and the others."

Emilia touched the magic stone at her breast as she spoke.

Emilia's precious family that was still slumbering there had been the first people to affirm Emilia, who had a habit of always seeing things through rose-tinted glasses.

And in addition to that family, there were all her friends and comrades here in the tower who had acknowledged her.

"So, I don't mind what anyone else thinks!"

Emilia spoke sharply, even if she was talking to the Holy Dragon, who had almost overwhelmed her initially.

Her soul had been on the verge of being crushed by the overwhelming difference in presence, and her limbs trembled so much it felt like they might shrivel away. But even after she had come face-to-face with a being who had bore witness to vast eons of time, Emilia absolutely wouldn't lose to it.

"———"

As she clenched her fists, her purple eyes gleamed assertively.

Volcanica slowly blinked. And then it opened its majestic jaw…

"—Thou who hath reached the tower's peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor."

"———"

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."

"…Huh?"

Emilia held her breath, prepared for whatever challenge Volcanica might give her, but hearing the heavy words that escaped with the dragon's breath, she cocked her head. It was a familiar line.

"Umm, that's what you said before, right? I'm the person who came to the first floor, and you're Volcanica… That's it, right?"

"———"

"…Ah! Is it because I didn't introduce myself? Sorry. I'm Emilia. Just Emilia. There are a lot of people who don't really remember me at the moment, as it happens, so it would be a little hard if you asked me to prove it, but I'm Emilia!"

"———"

"…Is that not it?"

She thought perhaps that skipping her introduction had maybe upset the dragon, so she took a moment to introduce herself, but Volcanica's response didn't inspire much hope.

"…Maybe…"

Emilia gingerly stepped forward, staring into its golden eyes.

With one, then two steps forward in this place so close to the sky, Emilia moved closer to Holy Dragon Volcanica. She boldly approached the being whose every breath felt solemn.

Then she reached out her hand, touching a scale on its front leg.

"…It's cold."

The scale was like ice, or frozen steel.

How long would it have to stay still to lose enough heat to end up like that?

Wouldn't that mean death for most living things? Long periods of stagnation robbed a body of more than just its vitality.

"—Thou who hath reached the tower's peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor."

"______"

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."

Looking down at Emilia touching its front leg, Volcanica repeated itself once more.

A third greeting. That wasn't just rebuking Emilia for forgetting her manners.

She was reflected in Volcanica's deep eyes as they looked at her, but they also seemed not to reflect anything.

The reason was clear.

"Did you become such an old dragon that you forgot about the examination…?"

A mental death, rather than a physical one, had taken the long-lived dragon.

For Emilia, who had to overcome the first floor's examination, this was an even more difficult challenge than the actual examination.

The examination for Maia, the first floor of Great Pleiades Library.

Time: as long as her allies can stay alive. Attempts: unknown. Challengers: one. Examination contents: unknown.

—Examination start.

3

Holy Dragon Volcanica, left alone for so many long years, had died in spirit.

More practically speaking, after being isolated for so long, it had forgotten its role.

"But it's a problem if you're like Puck! Hey, Volcanica!" Emilia shouted and hit the dragon's front leg.

"—Thou who hath reached the tower's peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor."

"Argh! It's no good!"

But all she got in return was the feeling of tough scales and the wall of dementia that seemed even tougher to break than those scales.

The second floor's examination had been troublesome, but this made Reid's test almost seem cute. Though the idea of that violent man seeming cute felt like a terrible joke…

“Ugh…what do I do, what do I do…? It’s not like it’s the same as Reid, where I have to beat up Volcanica, either…”

They were both challenging, but the examinations for the second and third floors were completely different.

The challenge put to them on Taygeta was one they had to use their heads to solve. Fortunately, they had solved it, thanks to Subaru’s knowledge from beyond the Great Waterfalls, but it would have been terrible without it.

And Electra’s challenge was, of course, the obstacle of Reid Astrea. With a lot of hard work, Emilia had somehow managed to smack him upside the head and win, but it had also only worked because it was her first attempt.

Either way, both the challenges had been difficult, and they had just barely scraped by.

So even facing it normally should have been difficult enough, and yet…

“Not even telling me the challenge…”

“—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will.”

“Argh! I get it already! Tell me the next line already, please!”

There was a faint hope that if she waited even a bit, she might hear the next part, but she didn’t have the time to waste testing it.

She resisted the urge to stamp her foot in frustration as she looked around her.

The third floor’s examination had been given by a black stone slab that Subaru and Julius had had fun calling a monolith. Maybe there was something like that hidden around the first floor.

With Volcanica not being any help, the best bet was to search for the challenge herself.

“I have to do all I can right now…!”

While always keeping an eye on Volcanica’s movements, Emilia peeled her eyes, examining the layout of the first floor.

This was the top floor of the Pleaides Watchtower, so high up that it couldn’t be seen from below. There were six pillars spaced around the circular area, and a single giant pillar in the center, where Volcanica was crouching. The circular area had a radius of around 328 feet.

The most suspicious place would be…

“…That big pillar in the middle that Volcanica is clinging to.”

At a glance, that big pillar was the thing that stood out the most in the area. Unlike the other six pillars, it was the only one that seemed to extend farther up beyond the first floor. As if there was something like another floor up there—a level zero.

“—Thou who hath reached the tower’s peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor.”

Volcanica's response was unchanged.

For Emilia, more than feeling despair or disappointment, she felt relieved. If Volcanica's response was unchanged, then it was disinterested, like when she had touched its front leg.

Emilia put her faith in that initial finding and moved around behind Volcanica to examine the thick pillar…

"…Eh?"

The moment she touched it, she heard the sound of wind.

Before she could check what it was, she instinctively created an ice barrier over her head. The next instant, the impact hit her through the ice wall, knocking her slender body back.

"Kagh."

The impact struck her from chest to back, and she crumpled to the floor with a cough. Putting her hands on the floor to stop herself, she managed to get control of her body again.

Wondering just what had happened, Emilia slowly looked up and noticed.

The tail of the Holy Dragon clinging to the pillar gradually sank back to the ground.

"…I got swatted by its tail?"

Put that way, it was actually a very simple attack.

She had seen a different dragon use her tail to express her emotions more than once while watching Subaru interact with Patrasche. Whenever Subaru was playing around a little too much, Ram or Patrasche would both try to smack him like it was a race.

But the blow from Volcanica's tail was incomparable to the love taps that Patrasche gave Subaru. It was only because of her instant defense that she had gotten off this easily. If she was a little slower, her neck might have been snapped, or her head knocked clean off.

With that realization, she felt a cold sweat trickle down the back of her neck. But at the same time, it highlighted a possibility.

"There must be something with that pillar."

"———"

"You're here for an examination. Even if you've forgotten that, you still haven't lost it. That's why you keep repeating the same thing."

Volcanica seemed like it had forgotten what it was supposed to do. But even so, the Holy Dragon still sitting here was proof of just how unyielding its resolve was to keep the promise it made before its mental death.

The Sage, the Sword Saint, and the Holy Dragon testing their knowledge, strength, and will.

In which case…

"Half-hearted commitment isn't enough. I'm going to be serious, too."

Accepting that Volcanica would block her way, Emilia let it know that she was going to use force.

The air around her cracked, and the world slowly began to freeze over. Warriors of ice began to form, like attendants to a queen—the newest possibility that Emilia had developed through her Icebrand Arts.

She had not been able to test it inside the narrow confines of the tower, but in a space like this, with an opponent like this, there was no need to hold back.

She had not told Subaru about this one, so he had not given it a name.

Meaning Emilia was the one to do it.

"Mr. Soldiers and Icebrand Arts…!"

She created seven warriors of ice, humanoid in form but each with their own weapons. Brave companions who would accompany Emilia in her dangerous battle…

"I'm coming, sleepyhead! If you can wake up, then hurry up and do it!"

Emilia raised her own ice weapon and closed in on Volcanica together with her soldiers of ice.

With an unreadable gaze, Volcanica opened its mouth:

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."

Its consciousness was still buried in the great beyond.

4

Ram gradually increased the heat of her body, removing the limiters in stages.

Her blood boiled and the muscles in her slender body undulated.

It was a girl's body that may have felt soft, fragile, and unreliable to the touch, but the blood that flowed inside her veins, and the flesh and bones that made her, were those of one of the strongest races in the world.

The return of the Oni god, the warrior hailed as greatest masterpiece of all…

"That's our big sister! Ahh, how wonderful! So radiant! The sister Rem could never hope to match, no matter how she tried!"

"Don't drool. It is uncouth. And do not compare me to anyone."

"Heh, why is that?"

"It should be obvious. I don't need anything more than the title of Rem's big sister."

Ram kicked off the stairs, descending in a flash with a preemptive attack, but Lye evaded with a big leap backward.

She unleashed a series of ferocious attacks using her arms and legs, any of which would shred skin, break bones, and liquefy internal organs.

It wasn't a martial art that relied on just simple physical abilities or techniques. If it was just pure finesse, then Lye would have been able to handle it by re-creating some of the countless techniques he had access to from the memories of those he had consumed.

However, there was a clear difference between what Ram was doing and something simple like that.

"———"

She surged forward, freely controlling the acceleration of each and every knee and elbow she threw at the Archbishop. Cladding herself in her specialty wind magic, she was subtly weaving deception into the middle of her combat.

She was manipulating Lye's perceptions by accelerating or decelerating attacks with wind. And to top it off, she was using the wind to spread her presence in all directions, slipping her attacks into his dead angles with swift motions, unleashing with multiple deadly blows.

"Hah! Can't get enough of this!"

Just barely dodging her attacks, Lye cheered happily.

He was bleeding from his right cheek, and his long, disheveled brown hair danced wildly, but Gluttony was apparently enjoying the comparison of skills.

"Grudges are a spice we can't get enough of! The bitterness of those shrewd tricks! You are the perfect dish for a gourmet like us, sister!"

Lye grinned condescendingly as they descended the spiral stairs, constantly changing places.

Saliva dripping from his open mouth, he hit Ram's wand with the two swords in his hands and opened some space between them.

"Yes, nice, great, delicious, delectable, more, more! Gluttony! Gluttony!"

"———"

"The scent of that rage is divine! Someone who hates us specifically this much…what sort of flavor will you have?!"

Clapping his hands, he shuddered in anticipation of an incomprehensible pleasure. Watching that, Ram exhaled a deep breath, and confirmed her body's condition.

"It is still a far cry from my original form, but…"

She would never let it show, but Ram was genuinely struck with wonder.

"I know myself better than anyone" was a pat phrase used by a certain type of person who didn't actually understand themselves, but unlike those fools, Ram really did have a complete grasp of her own self.

Ever since she lost her horn, she always felt overwhelmed by a terrible burden. Because of that, she had consciously placed certain limiters on herself.

Ordinarily, during the times when she was working as a servant, all those limiters were in place. But there were times when incidents might happen, situations where she would have to use magic to resolve a situation. In those moments, she would release one of the limiters, allowing herself to use the bare minimum amount of magic. And in situations where even that wasn't enough, she would undo the second limiter. In that state, she could wield maybe a fifth of her original abilities, though anything she did would have to be resolved quickly.

The battle with Garfiel in the Sanctuary a year and a half ago had been one such instance.

That was the full strength Ram could wield as a hornless. She was confident that any more and her body would break, unable to endure the strain.

And right now, Ram was attempting to unlock one more level of that double-edged strength.

"———"

For an instant, Ram felt a rare instance of hesitation in her chest.

As stated, Ram perfectly understood her own self. In all her battles up to this point, the recoil from the combat would cause a head-splitting pain and leave her bleeding from the eyes or nose, and she would have to be ready to not be able to move her body for a while when she was done.

But there was none of that. Because it was all flowing into Subaru, who was sharing her fate.

"…If I take too long, Barusu will die."

If things were going according to plan, Subaru would be running around, trying to deal with the rampaging Shaula and the onrushing horde of demon beasts. He would have Beatrice and likely Meili with him. Emilia, who made her memories ache, would be heading to the top floor of the tower and fighting on her own there.

Mysteriously, she couldn't help concerning herself with the actions of that earnest, silver-haired girl. She was surely someone who had given her plenty of trouble before her name was stolen.

Everyone was so unreliable without Ram around.

And so…

"Hold on like your life depends on it, Barusu. Don't make Rem cry."

With that, Ram released her third limiter for the first time in ten years.

5

That instant, Cor Leonis hit Natsuki Subaru with a new level of suffering.

One of the faint lights he could sense in the tower suddenly swelled, and an instant later, his body felt the intense blowback.

"Subaru!"

Beatrice, who he was cradling in his arms, supported him as he coughed up blood and almost slumped over.

Unfortunately, he and Beatrice were not currently riding Patrasche, who he was more used to. Instead, they were astride a ravenous horse lord, a monster that it was hard to imagine letting any living creature ride it.

With hardly any experience riding a creature and no blessing to part the wind and without a saddle to sit on or stirrups to brace against, he knew that a moment's distraction would send him straight to the ground.

The reason it had not happened yet is because he had wrapped his Guilty Whip around the creature's upper body to use as reins and because Beatrice was controlling their mass with finely tuned magic.

Subaru couldn't let himself ruin that persistent effort.

"I suppose that was recoil from Ram," Beatrice commented perceptively.

"Good guess…ghh, sorry, I'll hold on somehow…ghh…" Subaru adjusted his grip for a tighter hold on the whip.

There was a distinctly metallic taste that accompanied the nausea welling up inside him, and he had no clue where in his body the burden was coming from, but it was proof that Ram had gotten serious.

"If Ram can deal with that Gluttony brother, then…"

He wouldn't say that things would get a lot easier, because he couldn't be confident that defeating Gluttony would mean the return of the names and memories that had been stolen. But it would definitely decrease the burden Subaru was carrying.

—And if that happens, I can focus on just carrying Meili's burden.

"Hah, hah…"

Clinging to the gabaou's upper body, Meili was earnestly giving the demon beasts directions.

Meili's grave struggle was crucial to deal with the giant scorpion furiously wielding its pincers and stinger to take out Subaru.

Right now, Emilia's, Ram's, and Julius's strengths were necessary to break through the four obstacles threatening the Pleiades

Watchtower, but the person who was the cornerstone allowing them to all continue their fighting was none other than Meili Portroute.

Because of that, Subaru had been shifting a bit of the feedback from Meili's blessing onto himself.

"Winged moles! Flower bear! Together!"

With a broad view of the battlefield, Meili raised her voice and sent the demon beasts into a field of death.

The ache in Subaru's mind and the swollen feeling he was having were signs that she was fighting with her blessing's power fully unleashed.

"I really do have a double standard…"

On one hand, he really didn't want to rely on authorities or blessings if he could help it, but on the other, he wouldn't hesitate to use them for all they were worth, if push came to shove. It was true that weak people didn't have many options, but he didn't want to become corrupted, either.

He was being forced to take an immoral path, but he didn't want to forget that fact and just accept it as normal, either.

"Mister! Are you paying attention?! If you and Beatrice go down, this is all over, you know?!"

"I know," Subaru said, enduring the throbbing in his head. "Hey Meili, do you want to be my girl when this is all over?"

"—Ghh! Did you not hear me?! Focus!"

Neither of them had any leeway. If their concentration faltered, it would all be over in an instant.

But…

"If I have to suffer this much, there better be a great tomorrow waiting for me to make up for it."

6

"What is with you?" Meili murmured to herself while continuing to fight atop the sands.

Of course, that question could refer to a lot of people.

Shaula, who had transformed into the giant scorpion in front of them, the cheerful and spirited silver-haired half-elf, Ram and Julius and them fighting their various enemies in the tower, and Subaru and Beatrice fighting alongside her, in particular.

But the one that seemed the most off was…

"What is with *me*?"

Meili couldn't understand why she was acting like this.

From the point that she had joined them on their trip into the desert, she was already acting out of character. Acting accordingly in the moment, going with the flow of things. That had been the secret to her success in life, and she had intended to do the same here, too. And yet…

"…There just had to be a book of the dead."

When she heard it was possible to experience the feelings of someone who died, Meili couldn't resist the curiosity that welled up within her. She had no choice but to release the feelings toward Elsa Gramhilde smoldering away inside her all this time, and as a result, she had committed a series of errors that were completely out of character. And of all things, Subaru had questioned her and lectured her about it so high and mightily.

Mysteriously, though, for whatever reason, she didn't feel the urge to just snort derisively at his plea.

Somehow, she had even progressively promised to help afterward.

"Arghhhhh! I'm going to make him spoil me *so much* after this!"

So busy she couldn't even wipe the sweat off her brow, Meili grumbled about Subaru while carefully maintaining just the right distance from the giant scorpion as they kept each other in check.

This sort of decisive all-out battle wasn't her preferred way of fighting. Her style depended on careful preparation, positioning demon beasts nearby, setting them up just so, choosing the battlefield beforehand, and then watching everything unfold from afar.

That was Meili Portroute's specialty as a demon beast tamer. She had made her living stealing people's lives at the order, direction, and request of someone else.

So this was the first time.

—The first time she had fought to save someone's life, to protect someone.

"This isn't my style at all!"

Subaru's delirious rambling earlier had been impossibly irritating. Saying something like that to Meili. That attitude, like he couldn't imagine why he might be hated, was genuinely infuriating.

Even though she felt nothing but bad things when she thought about Subaru, before she knew it, she had started listening to his instructions, letting herself be moved around like a piece on a game board, like everyone else.

If it was a situation Subaru had created out of some deep insight and devious design, then it would at least make sense to Meili. But there was no way to look at Subaru and think he had the capacity for that. All he had was desperation, pushy expectations, and a ludicrous amount of faith in the people he trusted with his life…

"It feels like I've become a big dummy, too."

Meili pulled up the demon beast she was holding underground, aiming it at the scorpion.

"——"

A massive sandworm erupted from below the reddish sands. Twisting its massive, thirty-three-foot-plus body, it barreled down on the giant scorpion.

It would have been the upset of the century if it could crush the scorpion and bury it in the sands—but it didn't go so smoothly.

A white flash erupted, blowing away the sandworm's massive torso in an instant.

Split in half, the sandworm shrieked and collapsed as fluids spilled out from its body, breaking apart into finer pieces as the stinger unleashed even more attacks.

But by sacrificing the sandworm, she'd created cover from the splattering flesh and blood in the air.

The real aim was the three gabaou that appeared from where the sandworm had leaped out of the ground.

"——*Giiiiii.*"

With a baby's cry, the flaming half-human, half-horse monsters launched a suicide charge on the scorpion.

Meili had spotted all sorts of different monsters in the Auguria Dunes, but in terms of pure firepower, the gabaou reigned supreme.

"I guess I'm in top form."

Meili was riding one herself, Subaru and Beatrice were riding another, and she had three more prepared for this attack. The burden of controlling all of them at once should have been incredibly heavy.

But for some reason, Meili wasn't really feeling the effects of it.

There was a possibility it was just the excitement of battle, but either way, she intended to make the most of it.

She wasn't trying to finish the scorpion off. But if she could at least hurt it a little, it would make Subaru's goal that much easier to pull off.

"——"

In a sense, it might be the third time ever that Meili, the girl who had always lived her life by going with the flow, had tried to do something of her own volition.

The first was going out at night in search of salvation in the books of the dead.

The second was when she had snuck up on Subaru standing at the top of the spiral stairs when she had felt trapped.

And the third was now, when she sought a better result than was expected of her to buy more time.

"Meili!"

There was a bloody shout as the three gabaou charged at the scorpion.

It came from Subaru, who had blood trickling from his mouth as he shouted.

Meili was wary when she realized it wasn’t praise or joy or wonder.

Even though she was going so far above and beyond, why was he so angry?

But then…

“—Huh?”

The three monsters furiously charged with blazing lances raised.

Her calculation that no matter how deftly the scorpion could handle its pincers and tail, it should not be able to block them entirely—all that broke down when she saw the change in the scorpion’s body.

As if scorched by flame, or as if absorbing blood just like the sands…

Its black carapace was normally a dull, steel-like gleam, but it had suddenly started changing colors. In a beat, its pitch-black color turned into a bloody crimson.

Certain species of demon beasts had a transformation that was sometimes called an offensive color.

A change where their actions clearly differed from before, becoming more ferocious and violent. In many cases, there was an external change as well, the easy proof that such a transformation had occurred. The gabaou’s flames swelling, or the white whale sprouting eyes all over its body.

And it also applied to the giant scorpion—or rather the crimson scorpion.

More aggressive, more destructive, and more devastating…

“…ah.”

Unleashing a white light in all directions, it annihilated the three gabaou charging down on it. And at the same time, the aftermath of the wild flashes flew across the sands—

“______”

Swallowed up in the torrent of light, Meili’s small body flew through the air with a spray of blood.

7

From a young age, Ram had hated the feeling of her blood boiling and the overflowing exaltation.

The feeling of omnipotence that made her feel like she could rule over everything in this world.

If she allowed herself to remain drunk on that illusion, even with as stout a mind as she had been blessed with, there would surely come a day when she took the wrong path.

She was aware of her excellence. But it wasn’t something worth putting too much stock in. She could make mistakes. She did have the determination to be careful not to make mistakes, and she was committed to correcting any mistakes she did make.

And the reason she was able to adopt that posture was because she had not become intoxicated by apparent omnipotence. Not mistaking herself as something wonderful, as did those around her who lionized her, she didn't become a puppet of those beings who held to ancient mysticism and withered old customs.

And what was the reason she had managed to avoid being crushed by those external things? She knew that it was surely thanks to something that she couldn't remember.

Because…

"I'm not just cute, I'm also wise."

Singing her own praises, Ram stepped down, breaking the step of the staircase.

The next instant, the peach-haired Oni clad in the wind swung her arm, cleanly breaking the arm of her opponent who tried to stop it. Wrist, elbow, shoulder all twisted in the blink of an eye, snapping loudly.

"—Gah!"

His reaction was too late. As he started to cry out, her fist slammed into the side of his face, and Ram's pale fingers became a barrage.

Pummeled all over by countless blows, Lye went flying backward with a cough of blood. Chasing after him, Ram rode the wind she created beneath her feat, leaping high into the air.

"Hee-hee!"

Lye swung both legs upward, as if to catch Ram.

The next moment, a distortion in space touched Ram's shoulder, leaving a shallow cut on her clothes and skin—an invisible blade in midair, an impudent trap born of wind magic left behind for her.

"Something like this—"

"You think you can blow it away with a gust of wind? Nope, nope, nope! That's fixed in space right there! Even you can't brush it aside, Sister. Too bad!"

Reading her intent, Lye kicked off the air with a bloody grin on his face.

He wasn't actually kicking space but using the blade that had cut Ram's shoulder to walk through the air—a foothold whose position only he knew. Using them, he freely leaped all around the spiral staircase that covered so much of the tower. However…

"—Clairvoyance."

Even if it was impossible to perceive them with her eyes, it was simple enough to deduce their locations using the trap-setter's eyes.

And so Ram used the exact same footholds, leaping out overhead even faster than Lye.

"Hah! Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Are you kidding? Seriously, sister?!"

"You sound almost like Barusu. Thank you, that removes any hesitation I had to slap you down."

Ram mercilessly brought her heel down on Lye's unpleasant, stunned face.

"Now, how many times will you taste the sole of my shoes until you fall down?"

Lye groaned as his nose was crushed and his small body spun in midair. What stopped his ascent was Ram's kick, sending him straight down. And following up, Ram raised her hands upward, generating a wind to descend rapidly, landing a second, third, and fourth kick to Lye's face as he fell.

Mercilessly, she shattered his nose, teeth, jaw, and forehead with each blow.

Every time he called Ram sister with that grin of his was repulsive.

"Well? Do you regret it?"

Deftly controlling herself in midair, Ram rested her feet on his face and chest.

Not answering, Lye furrowed his bloody face in annoyance as he tried to swing the swords in his hands. But in that moment, Ram's hands slashed, dislocating both of his arms at the shoulder. No matter how amazing his techniques, he couldn't swing his arms with joints that didn't work.

"Well? Do you regret it?"

Looking down at his wide-eyed, stunned face, Ram asked again.

Staring into his eyes, she looked for a sign of fear. Engraving that into him was her goal. The dread, pain, and a sense of defeat so that he felt he couldn't go against her. But it wasn't for something so small as mere revenge.

"Rem…"

To get her back.

And all the countless other victims of Gluttony as well. To return all those who had had their names and memories, their histories stolen away from them.

If killing him was enough, Ram could do that in the blink of an eye.

With the same effort she had put into destroying his face, she could make a blade of wind on the bottom of her foot and cut his head off. Even as repulsively resilient as Witch Cultists were famed to be, it had already been demonstrated that severing their heads would still kill them.

In the burning Oni village, when she had been fighting with those who had destroyed the village.

In the first place, she already knew the cultists were nothing more than a band of weak fools who happened to be hideously twisted.

Because of that, she was asking him questions to destroy his spirit before ending his life.

"Well? Do you regret it?"

"—ghh, *Solar Eclipse*!"

With the third question, there was a trace of terror in his bloodred eyes.

But it disappeared in truly the blink of an eye.

Not in the sense of moving at extreme speed. The sensation of crushing his head was missing.

But her vision still overlapped with his, through using Clairvoyance. She quickly discerned where he had fled in the middle of the stairs. Clad in wind, she chased after him, only to find a bald old man in a monk's robes.

The change in appearance might have stunned anyone other than Ram. But by sharing his vision, she knew for a fact it was Lye, even if his appearance had changed.

"I heard that transforming was Lust's trick, but I don't have time to indulge you with your games."

The fight was overwhelmingly one-sided. But it had been more than a minute since Ram had undone a big limiter—there was a slight burden on her, too, but the vast majority of it was flowing to Subaru.

She had told him to limit himself to just modulating it, but as expected, he had gone and decided to just assume all of her burden. Always trying to act cool.

That was something he should just save for Rem and the girl he cared about.

"…Return everything you have consumed as Gluttony. If you do…"

"If we do, what, young lady? You would let us go?"

"Not at all. If you do, I will kill you quickly. A good deal, don't you think? Even though you have earned thousands of deaths, you will be allowed to die just the once."

"Fwha."

Even Lye's mannerisms took on an elderly man's affect as he let out a hoarse chuckle.

Watching his movements, Ram had a supposition that this change of form was necessary to fully make use of a person's abilities. The way he had disappeared from in front of Ram earlier was a technique that allowed him to leap across space covering small distances. The person who had originally been able to do that was probably the old, bald-headed man Lye had transformed into.

"But it's odd. If you had something like this up your sleeve, it wouldn't have been strange for you to use it earlier. So why hide it this long, I wonder?"

"———"

"…Is there some reason you didn't want to use it? It strains your body, perhaps?"

"Golly gee…we have never encountered such a fearsome lass before… Not at all. You really are terrifying, sister."

The old man's form gradually shifted back into a smaller body.

It was an acknowledgment of Ram's conjecture and also proof that the transformation had not removed the damage that she had done. Lye was still bloody, and his face was still in terrible shape.

"Your shoulders?"

"Fixed using the wall. Going in blind just isn't enough…oww, the pain."

Lye swung his arms in a big circle, confirming the feel of his readjusted shoulders. Ram reflected on her decision, deciding that she should have cut his arms off rather than simply dislocating his shoulders. Or if she had just mangled the ends of all four of his limbs, it would put an end to all his foolish tricks.

"Anticipating every single last one of the things we do…you really are incredible, sister. Are you maybe using some kind of authority, like he is?"

"How rude. Ram's discerning eye is just that excellent. Don't lump it in together with Barusu's incomprehensible intuition. It's unpleasant. Die at once."

"Aha-ha-ha. So harsh. But, but, ahh, that's right."

His long, torn tongue hung from his broken-toothed mouth in a bloody grin. Eyes widening slightly at his ominous gesture, Ram tensed her shoulders.

If he did something strange—no.

"Take this before you can."

Before he could do anything, Ram chose to tear his limbs away with a blade of wind.

There were ways of stopping bleeding. There was no stopping the pain, but the interrogation could continue so long as he didn't die. With that judgment, she unleashed unbridled blades of wind, but…

"—Your loss is our gain!"

As the blades landed, a big, round, bearded man leaped backward. His skin was so thick that the wind blades bounced off without even leaving a red mark on his skin.

"Like, you just don't get it, do ya, sis? Let's be real. You aren't the only one watching your opponent here."

Ram was about to give chase, to prevent the big man from escaping, when that voice rang out.

The next instant, a blade left in space for Ram lightly nicked her neck, slowing her chase by a half step. And the old man Lye thrust into that tiniest of openings.

"Our approach, followed by our punch!"

In a blink, the old man disappeared, and the being that appeared behind her swelled in menace. Without even the time to spin around, she felt an intense punch land right in her side, sending her slender body flying.

Watching her groan was a stout man with a wild air about him—three different figures had traded places in an instant, and their unique traits were all perfectly applied…

"But even so. Don't imagine the same trick will work twice—"

"We don't. We don't at all. Of course not. We don't already!"

Lye roared while turning into the old man again and covering one of his eyes with his hand.

Worried about that movement, Ram stretched her long legs, kicked off the wall, and quickly tried to adjust her position to leap at him.

However, she wasn't fast enough.

"We know. Rem's big sister can't keep moving like this without some sort of trick."

He reached that answer by using Rem's knowledge, not by observing Ram's movements. Seeing Ram's movements that surpassed the limits of a hornless Oni, Lye was sure of his interpretation, and when Ram returned to the stairs, his evil intent was already complete.

"Sister, we don't particularly care about winning a test of strength with you."

With a crafty smirk, he disappeared into the air.

Teleportation by distorting space across short distances—by continually doing that, it was easy to flee a battlefield. He had no intention of stopping and fighting to the death.

"You are quick to decide to flee. No…"

If he knew about Ram's Clairvoyance, then he should not be expecting to simply run away. The reason he took his distance even knowing about it was that he realized she was working under a time constraint. And unfortunately, she'd had a not insignificant amount of time stolen away from her.

The burden on Subaru was increasing by the second.

She needed to find where Lye had fled into the tower as soon as possible.

Just as she thought that, though, she noticed.

The Archbishop that was a pure ball of malice wasn't just running into the tower to get away.

He was thinking carefully about how best to torment Ram to the greatest extent.

That was…

“Rem.”

As she finally connected back to his evil gaze, it reflected in her eyes.

The tail of the black ground dragon running, and the sleeping prince on the dragon’s back.

CHAPTER 6

GOOD LOSER

1

Intense battles were unfolding all around the Pleiades Watchtower.

Emilia was challenging the oblivious Holy Dragon, Ram was gnashing her teeth at Lye Batenkaitos's maliciousness on the lower floors, and Subaru and two little girls were doing everything they could to save their comrade out in the sands.

The clash of swordsmen on the second floor, Electra, was just one furious struggle among many. However, there was no changing the fact that it was utterly one-sided.

"Oraoraoraora! C'mon! I'm down one chopstick, fighting one-handed, and you still can't touch me? Are you jokin'? Huh? Are ya?!"

"Grgh…"

Roaring heartily, the man with long red hair kicked with immense force.

Intercepting it with the hilt of the sword in his hand, the elegant knight leaped back a great distance. He couldn't completely nullify the impact, only disperse it. And before he could steady himself, the next blow was already coming.

Time and time again, this scene repeated itself on the second floor that had become a raging battlefield.

When he saw the knight leap away yet again, the swordsman muttered in exasperation.

"Pinnin' your hopes on an explosion? Think your sword'll change if your mood changes? If so, when exactly are you gonna make it happen? Or…"

Reid's lips twisted as he shook his head. He glared with open disdain at the knight who was facing one of the greatest swordsman of all time.

"…Are you plannin' to lose, relyin' on the only trick you know? You gonna be satisfied with that?"

"—You are quite indulgent in your comments."

The knight on the other end of Reid's continuous barrage of insults—Julius—softened his expression.

“You have said similar things to me time and time again. A boring fighting style, polite sword techniques, lacking in freedom…I happen to have some familiarity with those complaints.”

“Hah, figures. Anyone’d feel the same, watchin’ you, even if they aren’t my level. There ain’t nothing to your sword but desperation.”

“…‘Desperation,’ you say.”

Reid’s comments were not derived from any sort of sublime aesthetic.

Most likely, he was just saying whatever he felt in the moment. That he grasped Julius’s true nature nonetheless was because those blue eyes, even with one intentionally covered, saw through everything.

To him, Julius’s ideals might look like a shallow facade hiding his true character.

“——”

A quick glance behind him confirmed the presence of the woman watching over their fight.

She was, to Julius, a duplicate of the woman who was the most precious being in the world to him. However, she was a woman who had been occupied by another person. Though it was beyond their control, they had persisted in such a hollow lord and retainer bond ever since the battle in the Water Gate City nigh two months ago.

“Thinking back on it, you and I should have spoken more frankly.”

“Julius…?”

“Had we done so, we might have become good friends. Since we both care for and admire the same woman.”

Julius corrected his collar that had gotten ruffled in the fighting.

Even if he had abandoned the pretense of being nameless, he would never cease to be a knight. Reid scoffed in annoyance yet again when he saw how adamant Julius was.

“You know, I was hopin’ that you would change when that other babe and the broad behind you showed up. Maybe you’d finally come at me ready to win, no matter what it took or how it looked. That’s what I wanted to see. You don’t understand yourself, do you?”

“——”

“You act all nice and proper, like a knight, but that ain’t the real you. Deep down, you’re a stick swinger just like me. All this stuck-up, formal shit just gets in the way.”

Pointing his chopstick at Julius, Reid wore a bitter look on his face.

In response, Julius closed his eyes. After a moment’s silence, he finally murmured, “I see. I feel like I finally understand.”

"Ahh? Understand what?"

"Why you are so relentless with me."

As annoyed as he was, Reid never stopped talking to Julius. His methods were violent, and he most likely had no conscious intent to do so, but it seemed he was trying to teach Julius. A progenitor guiding those who followed in their footsteps.

Julius finally understood why Reid went to such lengths to lead him about by the nose.

"You saw in me what also exists inside you."

The reason he had sneeringly berated Julius's boring fighting style and polite swordsmanship was because he believed there was a slumbering lion underneath.

Julius personally believed it was a gross overestimation, but…

"Spare me complex crap like that, you scrawny beansprout. I just do what I want, how I want. And my instincts are tellin' me that you'd be more interesting without that mask."

"———"

"That's why I'm tryin' to peel it off. You get it, too, right? Stay like that and you'll never reach me. Stay like that and you won't be able to look cool for the broad behind you."

Julius smiled bitterly at seeing Reid jerk his chin, gesturing toward Echidna.

Reid's eyes really were remarkable. He saw things so clearly.

He understood well that Julius Juukulius was a simple man who cared a great deal how others saw him.

"All the more reason I cannot bend my very being."

"Say what?" Reid scowled.

"You are undoubtedly correct. Much of what you say rings true… It is a forgotten history in this world where everyone has forgotten me, but I am not the legitimate child of the Juukulius house," Julius began, loud enough to reach Echidna, who was stoutheartedly facing forward.

This was the history of the Julius Juukulius forgotten by all save Natsuki Subaru.

"I was born to a mother who was a commoner and a father who abandoned his noble birth to be with her. So I am, in origin, a commoner. When my mother and father passed away, my uncle became my adoptive father and took me in. It was he who introduced me to the culture and education of nobility… Thus, my way of life is a manufactured one."

"A botched sham, more like it."

"It may very well be. At heart, I may simply be the same child running through the fields in commoner's clothes and laughing with friends, a rustic child who knows nothing of grander ideals."

Clueless as to what proper decorum was and without any lofty ideals to maintain, just living his days to the fullest. That was the kind of future he could have expected. But then that future disappeared, carried away in the same flash flood that took his parents away from him.

"Which is why I pretend myself a knight. I occupy myself with these pretensions, sealing away what some would call my true self."

"You…"

"Ignorant and unknowing, I encountered an ideal. I dreamed of becoming a knight. I wanted to become a gallant and upstanding figure. That aspiration is what brought me here."

There was a renewed strength in Julius's yellow gaze as he adjusted his cape.

Reid had been annoyed, but now his expression showed suspicion. It was surprising that he stayed quiet even though he was being contradicted. The most outrageous, inconsiderate man was engrossed by Julius's words.

Julius continued in a loud voice.

"I am an artless man. The superficial is often my first concern. I have come this far, believing that if I hold a splendid blade, wear impressive clothes, and speak with courtesy, I can become the man I want to be. And so I will continue holding on to that stubborn pride and pageantry."

He knew there were people who despised such pretension. Natsuki Subaru was a perfect example. But Julius saw things differently.

"Good posture, upholding appearances, striving to embody the kind of person you wish to be seen as—those are a measure of one's determination to endure. That is the facade I have dedicated myself to and will never betray."

"———"

"There are those who dismiss the value of appearances. However, I believe there as just as many who are dazzled by them. The same way I am so enthralled with knighthood."

He couldn't remember who first sowed the seeds of his admiration for knights. But in time, Julius became known as the Finest of Knights. The reason for that wasn't his polished swordsmanship, nor his refined spirit magic. Nor was it the fundamental strength that underpinned both of those. It was because those around Julius Juukulius believed that the way he lived and the way of a knight were one and the same. Because his pomp and circumstance was so dazzling that it was the finest example they had of what a knight should aspire to be.

With that, Julius's expression softened as he turned toward Echidna. He shook his head as he regarded the woman who was borrowing the form of his beloved master, the woman who regretted from the bottom of her heart that she couldn't remember Julius.

He wanted to let her know that she shouldn't feel guilty for it.

"There is no need to fear, regret, or bemoan what is forgotten. Because the place where you can find me will always be the chivalrous code that everyone knows, and the ideal who all aspire to follow."

And he could say the same thing to *they* who had remained here for him.

"Sorry for everything, my sprouts. Clinging to our lost bond, unable to let go, I have troubled you all this time. I shall free you from that yoke now."

Drawn by his voice, six vivid, glimmering lights came into view—six spirits, one of each attribute, Julius Juukulius's six quasi-spirits.

The beings who he couldn't bring himself to let go, who had been by Julius Juukulius's side before he ever became a knight. They, too, had forgotten Julius when his name was stolen by Gluttony's authority. However, the bond of spirit and contractor remained, and drawn by Julius's innate blessing of spirit attraction, they had remained near and yet distant.

Believing that he could repair the bond he had with them if he recovered his name, he had not attempted to let them go.

It was an act of utter foolishness. With everything around him so horribly changed, he had not wanted to lose what little remained.

However…

"You did well to stay with me so long, my sprouts. I indulged myself in your affection, and in lingering attachment I refused to let you slip away out of a forlorn hope that I might return to those bygone days as if nothing had happened. Today, I shall relinquish that weak, pathetic, and cowardly self."

As if in confusion, the quasi-spirits swayed while spinning around him.

Julius gently extended his arm to them. Seeing his hand outstretched like a perch, they obliged him by gathering there. Julius smiled at the faint lights resting upon his arm.

"I was afraid of change. However, there are things that cannot be gained without the resolve to lose something first. Such as the seed of love sprouting into full bloom. Perhaps even a future where I might see just what sort of flowers you sprouts might become after spending so much time at my side."

"——"

They didn't respond.

However, it seemed as if they anticipated what would happen next, and Julius did not want to keep them any longer…

"My sprouts! I shall free you. Forgive me for clinging so long to a broken bond.”

With his words, the quasi-spirits flew away from his arm. It seemed as if they had all been struck by something. In truth, something did pierce Julius and the quasi-spirits—a pain that almost felt like a jolt of lightning.

The bond that had linked their souls had been severed. Only a spirit mage could understand the pain that came with losing that connection shared with a being that had been bound to their soul. Julius had never experienced it before, but this was the same pain that had once left Emilia curled up and crying.

With this final act, Julius had carved a hole in their souls as he bade farewell to the six spirits. Feeling a terrible ache tearing at his chest, Julius experienced the detachment of souls. It was pain fundamentally different from when he had been forgotten by his sprouts due to Gluttony’s authority.

It wasn’t just Julius this time. The spirits should have felt the same pain. There was a chance they cursed the wound in their souls and regretted making a pact with a human.

However…

“Even so, I would call upon you once again.”

“———”

“I love you. If you can accept the love of someone as pretentious as myself, then let us be bound once more. Let us forge a new pact!!!”

Julius raised his arm to the ceiling with a shout.

Hearing his call, the spirits that had scattered flickered quietly for a brief moment.

Their hesitation and indecision lasted an instant.

“———”

A soft light enveloped Julius Juukulius’s entire body. A gentle warmth soothed the wound in his soul left by their severed pact.

There was joy. Anger. Sadness. Love. Regret. This swell of emotions encompassed the more than ten years they had spent together. Clearing the slate, they spun a new future together.

He didn’t know if that was the correct choice. But he wanted to believe it was.

He might make many more mistakes. He wouldn’t be able to always pick the correct path, and he would err. But when that happened, he would mold himself.

Even if he faltered, he wouldn’t be alone. Not anymore. So long as he continued forward, there was an ideal for him that had been built up by his wonderful predecessors. When it seemed his legs might fail him, he would be sustained by the warmth of his sprouts who continued to watch over him.

And when he looked back, he saw his lady, the woman he had vowed to serve with the ideals upon which he had forged himself.

What could the future hold that Julius Juukulius need fear?

"That's right. My beautiful blossoms."

Six sprouts—or rather, six maidens in full bloom answered.

There was a light…

"I shall continue along this path even as we hurt each other gently and deeply."

The pain of the severed pact was soothed by a new bond.

As the six lights shone with a stronger glow than ever before, Julius Juukulius looked forward. Standing there was the man who represented the pinnacle of all those who lived by the sword.

However, he was not the object of Julius Juukulius's envy.

He felt little compunction about cutting down his idol with a streak of rainbow light.

"I have kept you waiting, Sword Saint Reid Astrea. It is an honor to make your acquaintance."

Swinging his knight's sword, Julius grabbed the edge of his cloak and performed an elegant bow. Raising his face, transforming himself completely into one of the most admired symbols in this world, he introduced himself.

"I am the Finest of Knights, Julius Juukulius. I am the sword of the Kingdom that shall cut you down."

2

The Finest of Knights. It had taken courage for him to call himself that.

Knight was a title that reflected one's honor. It took excellence, effort, and constant refinement to be worthy of that name. To be called the finest of all their number demanded that much more diligence and dedication.

Had he really put in the work to truly earn that title?

Had he given his all and surpassed his limits? Was he at all times polished to perfection? Did others always inspire him to devote himself to his ideals with ever greater conviction?

Yes. He could say without a doubt in his mind that Julius Juukulius had done just that.

"I am the Finest of Knights, Julius Juukulius. I am the Sword of the Kingdom that shall cut you down."

"———"

Julius grasped the hem of his cape and bowed as the Sword Saint before him fell silent.

Closing his uncovered eye, Reid didn't look at Julius. But as he quietly crossed his thick, burly arms, something seemed to be on his mind. He pondered on this and—

"—You would have been stronger if you broke out of your shell."

Reid's lips curled as he looked at the colorful, gleaming spirits around Julius.

Julius raised his eyebrow and then shook his head.

"If you say so, then perhaps it was a possibility."

As someone who was going to cling to the sword, then he should demonstrate it without concern for appearances. That attitude and that resolve was what he had been looking for in Julius, and it was a path he could have taken himself.

"However, I have decided to stay the course. Though you might well be correct that I would have become even stronger were I to break from my shell and completely let loose."

Julius was aware that if he hadn't made a deliberate choice not to, there was a good chance he would have naturally drifted toward that route himself. In a situation where he stood on the very boundary of life and death, that part of him might bubble to the surface. However, that was only true if he had not been so painfully aware of it.

He would never waver again.

"Allow me to say with absolute confidence, as a knight, I shall examine myself without reserve. And in doing so, I shall become better in every way than I might have if I had gone down the path you showed me."

"Hah. What makes you so sure?"

"That much should be obvious. The knighthood, I believe, is the manifestation of an ideal. It is pure and true and stronger than anything else. As long as I call myself a knight, that is how I must be as well."

With that declaration to the pinnacle of the way of the sword, the first-generation Sword Saint, Julius, felt his body and his heart grow lighter.

On further reflection, he realized that ever since he came to the Pleiades Watchtower—ever since his name had been stolen in the Water Gate City—he had constantly been in a state of unease.

Of course he had admonished himself, never allowing it to show. Many would interpret that as the feat of a man with a will of steel, but it wasn't anything so admirable.

As a result of his need to hide his own poor condition, he had ended up deceiving his comrades and even himself. It was the reason he had suffered a string of losses ever since arriving in this tower, including that truly unsightly defeat.

Julius should have trusted his companions. He should have asked for their help and shown them how much he cared. Just as his sprouts had done.

“I should have reforged the severed bonds. When you are no one, you can become anyone… I am living proof of that fact.”

A commoner’s child who came from nothing had become the most respected knight. Julius, who had become no one, should still have been able to become anything.

“Even if I had to repeat this moment, I am sure I would still aspire to be like the fiery boy I remember from that fateful day and strive to live up to the ideals of a knight I saw emblazoned on his back. And that would eventually lead me here, to this place, where I challenge you, the pinnacle of the sword…!”

“—Hah.”

Even Julius thought that line of thinking was absurd. An irrational argument that was laughably arbitrary.

However, Reid didn’t react with anger or scorn. He greeted it only with a sharp-toothed grin.

And…

“I’ll make you cry.”

With that, he threw down the chopstick in his hand and took a big leap back. As Julius readied himself, Reid slowly reached his hand to the side. His large hand grasped the sword of selection—having escaped from the fetters of his intended role as examiner and gained his freedom, he gripped that holy sword.

“‘Fool who attained the heavenly sword, gain his sanction.’”

“That’s my line… Though I forgot it, since it just slipped out before.”

Adjusting his grip on the sword, testing the feel of the blade, Reid pointed the tip effortlessly at Julius.

It was a movement without any special intent, but that simple gesture exuded so much pressure that Julius felt goose bumps rising all over his body.

“Gonna go cryin’ to mommy already?”

“…No. My heart leaped at the realization that I’m challenging a legend.”

It was no bluff. Julius gave a genuine answer as his emotion soared.

After all, it was true. Standing before him was Reid Astrea himself. Julius had been thrilled countless times by tales of his feats. He had looked up to him with sparkling eyes.

Now that he had actually met the man, he had been taken aback by his personality, but his strength lived up to the stories and then some.

All the more reason why he had thought it was such a waste.

When that crossed his mind, Julius’s lips relaxed just a little.

"What are you smilin' at?"

"Nothing. Merely an idle thought. Once I accomplish my goals here and return home, I should challenge my good friend Reinhard."

Julius shared the musing he'd just had that went beyond matters of the blade. Not once had Julius ever competed with Reinhard.

Now he regretted never trying to stand shoulder to shoulder with his friend.

That was also one of the reasons Julius chose to serve Anastasia and had embarked on the royal selection. But even without his own reasons, he would still have been charmed by Anastasia's incredible character. In time, he came to share her dream and wanted to stand alongside her. Pointless excuses and roundabout public facades were unnecessary.

He should have grabbed two wooden swords and run straight to Reinhard.

Once, the strongest swordsman in the Empire of Volakia had crossed blades with Reinhard. On that day, when everyone in the training yard was driven wild by their sheer spirit, Julius had felt his chest on fire as well.

That was the answer, so…

"What'd you say your name was?"

Asked his name by a true legend, Julius raised his brow.

He had introduced himself countless times already, including just moments ago, but it wasn't remembered. But whether it had been remembered or not was irrelevant.

"Julius Juukulius. It is a forgettable name, so please do remember it."

After cracking a joke he wouldn't have been able to laugh at not so long ago, Julius pointed his blade at Reid.

He prayed for support and called upon his new pact with the six spirits blooming so beautifully beside him. As they were now, he was sure they could reach new heights beyond even the rainbow aurora of *Al Clauzeria* and *Al Clarista*. It was formed by borrowing the power of all six spirits that wove all six elements together. *Clauzeria* unleashed it as an enormous burst of magic, while *Clarista* imbued it into his sword.

And the secret technique that he had never once succeeded at…

"Al Clanvel."

In an instant, light filled the white space as a rainbow shroud appeared in front of the crimson hero.

This was the secret art of Julius Juukulius's self-crafted rainbow spirit magic. It did not unleash the six elements as one giant ray, nor did it imbue his blade with them. Instead, his body itself was clad in the aurora and…

"Come…"

"Whatever."

"Have at you!!!"

The spirit knight's ultimate attack was met head-on by a white slash.

3

When she first became conscious, Echidna experienced a premonition.

The goal of an unnatural being like her was exhausted the moment she came into being.

Put another way, the point of her very creation was simply to exist, and it had already been fulfilled. And so she was abandoned, left to drift aimlessly in the world, forced to endure centuries of emptiness.

And in the course of those many years spent on a meaninglessly long life, she met her.

The vivid way that girl lived gave her frozen life a newfound detail and intensity. She wanted to see what would become of that girl who spouted such bold things despite her small body, and to see if there was anything she couldn't be.

At some point, her curiosity and interest became irrelevant…

"I don't want to lose you or the people you care about so much."

The passage of time was both a kindness and a cruelty.

Time healed wounds, but it also wore down emotions.

Having lived for such a very long time, for the first time she thought—

I don't want this time to pass.

The knight cloaked in a rainbow leaped straight into the white light.

While Julius unleashed his ultimate technique, Reid's reaction was terribly simple.

He brought down the sword that he had raised high. This was the single most repeated motion in this world—and it split the world diagonally, erasing everything in the light's path.

It wasn't some grand magic or special technique. With a simple slash of his sword, the world was seared by light. It made absolutely no sense. Was Reid Astrea just that monstrous, or were all Sword Saints like that?

What was clear was…

"Julius."

She wanted to do all she could so that the aurora wouldn't be overwhelmed by that white light.

However, there was nothing she could do. If there was anyone who could do something for Julius Juukulius, it had to be…

Touching her breast, she focused on the being sleeping inside her. The original owner of this body. The reason Echidna had come out to this tower in the desert: to find why she remained in such a deep slumber.

—But that was a lie.

Echidna already knew why she wasn't waking up.

The girl who boasted of her own greed, who talked boldly about wanting to possess absolutely everything. Once she had gotten her hands on something, she was loath to let it go. She hated the idea of losing anything. So of course, there was only one explanation.

"When you gave control to me, you slipped into your own Odo and entered a state where the outside world can't affect you. In a way, your Odo is a self-contained world."

And she had closed herself off in that place.

The reason was obvious. If she came outside, she might be affected. Out here, she was vulnerable to the influence of the Archbishop of Gluttony's fearsome authority.

That might force her to forget things she wanted to remember. It could force her to let go of things she wanted to hold on to.

Anastasia Hoshin could forget Julius Juukulius.

—After watching him act so desperately as a nameless knight, then seeing his good and bad sides, she was sure. Even if Anastasia forgot, she could tell her.

"Ahh, right."

She thought she was simply an artificial spirit who had fulfilled her reason for being the moment she was born. Surprisingly, it had not ended there.

A bridge between a precious girl and a precious knight. What could be more important? It was laughable to think she had been born for this, but it was a terribly weighty role.

So…

"Not seeing your knight's coolest moment? As stingy as you are, there's no way you would miss something like that, right?"

4

The white light pressed forward, threatening to blot out the aurora.

Even after pouring out everything he had and borrowing the strength of the six spirits, Julius was still being overwhelmed.

He had used his greatest trump card while his opponent had simply swung a sword seriously for the first time in this battle. He was astonished at the absurdity of the situation. At the same time, there was an emotion welling inside his breast that agreed this was how it was meant to be.

A sword stroke that could split the world. The ultimate technique of a Sword Saint to rival Reinhard's.

In the middle of a life-or-death struggle, Julius had an idle thought.

If Reid and Reinhard fought, who would come out on top?

Legend versus legend, Sword Saint against Sword Saint. In a battle that could never happen, who would claim victory?

Unfortunately, he would never get the chance to find out.

"In which case, I will have to find out myself with my own body."

The only people who would ever have the chance to cross blades with both Reinhard van Astrea and Reid Astrea were those who had reached this tower. And the only ones to actually do so were Julius and Emilia, who had gone to the upper floor. Julius had no intention of yielding that role to anyone else.

All that remained was to win.

He had to break through the white light and defeat Reid Astrea with his rainbow.

For the sake of that, he poured his whole spirit into his sword and took one step forward…

If even the tiniest bit of his pride and strength as the Finest of Knights could be infused into the tip of his blade…

"Julius."

It was a voice that should not have been able to reach him. And yet it surely did.

Or perhaps it echoed not in his ears but somewhere deeper, in the depths of his soul.

If he had determined to live without breaking from the shell of a knight, then he had no choice but to answer it…

"—Go, my knight!"

Those words gave him the final push his blade needed.

"Ire! Qua! Aro! Ake! Ine! Ness!"

He called out to the spirits who had each become a part of the aurora. The enemy stood before them, just beyond the white light. They had to reach him.

The tip of his sword had to break through…

"Oooooooooooooh!!!"

With unusual fervor, he let out a bloody roar.

Prepared for death, he chose not to prioritize poise, but he reassured himself that this was not the same as abandoning his core tenets wholesale. Julius advanced with absolute confidence in his guiding principles.

"———"

Reid's slash cut through space, severing sound and color alike.

Whether it was the sword of selection or a chopstick, it became a manifestation of the very concept of a sword as long as he was holding it.

A sword was an object that was meant to cut things.

Swordsmanship was the technique of cutting things with a sword.

That meant a slash that could cut through everything in this world was both the greatest achievement and the ultimate desire of the sword and swordsmanship itself.

Anything cut by this all-powerful slash would never be able to forget that fact for all of eternity.

That was why the scar beneath Julius Juukulius's left eye would never fade.

It was the price of challenging the Sword Saint's sword head-on.

"———"

The pressure of the white light increased, and the unwavering gleam of the rainbow aurora only grew in intensity.

Two powerful lights crashed violently against each other…

"…Ah."

That struggle seemed like it might never end, until it suddenly reached an unexpected conclusion.

5

The eye patch covering the Sword Saint's left eye fluttered down to the white floor.

"…Ah."

Julius was dumbfounded as a feeble sound escaped his lips.

A curtain had come down on their all-out clash. However, unable to stop his momentum, he thrust his aurora-clad sword forward, piercing his opponent's vitals.

"Tch, damn it. What a lame way to end this."

Julius was shocked even though he was the one who had done the stabbing. Ironically, Reid was utterly calm. Despite the sword buried in his chest, he showed no sign of pain on his face. He didn't so much as wince. Was it due to his unwavering mental fortitude, or was there a different explanation inside his heroic body?

His burly chest sported another wound in addition to the one made by Julius's sword—they were cracks. And more were appearing.

They reached his arms, legs, neck, and cheeks. Wounds that looked like cracked glass spread across his whole body.

Julius understood on an instinctive level what it meant.

An impossible distortion that should never have existed was being corrected. That was what he was seeing.

"Well, there it is. There ain't nothing in the world that can contain a guy like me 'cept my own body," Reid said as he looked at his disintegrating hand. It was plain to see that he was right.

After Gluttony's authority pulled him in, Reid Astrea took over the Archbishop's body and returned to this world. But that didn't change the fact that the body was fundamentally the same one that belonged to the Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard.

In other words, the container Roy Alphard couldn't possibly hold Reid Astrea's soul.

The battle with Julius had pushed it to the limit.

"Then maybe you should have been the one to—!"

"Kah-kah-kah. Things never go the way you want 'em to—if you're a weakling, that is. What, you gonna cry about it?"

Casting down his sword, Reid donned a nasty grin.

How could he act like that? He was doomed to disappear from the world once more.

Perhaps, if he had defeated Julius, he might have been able to live a new life. That possibility had slipped away.

"Dumbass. What was I gonna do if I came back to life? Maybe play around with that babe who passed through before, or the broad over there might have been fine, too. Or that sexy babe…"

"D-do you really have no regrets…?"

"Nope. Doin' what I want, when I want is my style. It would be a lot easier for you if you did the same."

"…I am grateful for your advice. However, I believe that path to be much thornier."

Julius had chosen to keep his shell. He would wear it with his head held high. It would be fair to accuse him of living a lie, or perhaps more gently, to say that he was playing the part of someone fundamentally different from himself, in a way.

Because Julius had known someone who had chosen that path, had learned that he could live in that way, as he wished to be, he wouldn't choose Reid's uninhibited wildness for himself, though he found it dazzling to behold.

Tracing the scar beneath his left eye that would forever remain, Julius made a vow to the pinnacle of swords.

Reid snorted in annoyance at that response.

And then he looked at his own chest, pointing to the one mark that wasn't a result of the cracks formed by passing his body's limits.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, you bastard. It was a fluke your sword reached me. If this was my body, you wouldn’t even be able to touch me with your snot.”

“Not that I would ever attempt such a thing…”

“Hah! Loosen up a little!”

Reid hit Julius’s shoulder.

Tensing at the impact, Julius let out a long, deep breath. It wasn’t as if he had come to terms with everything, or even accepted it. But while he was flustered by what had happened before his eyes, to let this moment slip away would be unbearable.

The cracks spread enough that the end was in sight.

So Julius raised his sword he had pulled out of Reid and held it in front of his face.

“From the depths of my heart, I respect the strength of your blade.”

“I don’t need the adoration of a guy. I’m runnin’ away with this victory, Julius.”

“——”

Julius gazed in wonder when he was addressed by name at the very end.

However, since he had decided in his heart to stay steady, he hid his shock with a slight smile and a bow.

As the Finest of Knights, he had a duty to uphold his ideals. Just like he had so boldly claimed when he introduced himself to this living legend.

“Indeed, to the very end—it is your victory, Reid Astrea.”

“Hah. Not a bad look for a loser.”

With those parting words, the fractures spread…

6

“——”

Surprisingly, there was no sound when the widening cracks finally broke.

The red-haired hero disappeared, like light losing form or shattered glass—and in his place, what fell to the white floor was a small, unconscious boy.

The desecrating evil who consumed the memories and names of others without concern.

The Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard, sank to the ground.

"———"

He didn't move in the slightest. It was hard to tell whether he was alive or dead. But the deep wound on his left chest matched Reid's and was unmistakably a life-threatening blow.

Assuring himself of that much, Julius lowered the blade he had raised in respect, slipped it back into its sheath, and turned around.

The aurora faded, and the six bright spirits gathered around him. They had grown from sprouts into maidens in full bloom. Without their strength, it undoubtedly would have been Julius lying on the white floor.

He needed to convey his gratitude and appreciation for their efforts. However, with his apologies, he would have to postpone that happy moment.

Slowly, Julius walked forward.

He moved toward the dainty woman whose pale, blue-green eyes were watching him. Long, wavy, light purple hair and a pristine white outfit that was wholly at odds with their desert surroundings.

At her feet was a white fox whose black eyes wavered uncertainly. She had been hiding as a scarf all this time, but now she stood on her own. That could only mean…

Julius closed his eyes.

And…

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance."

He introduced himself, just as he had earlier when challenging the Sword Saint. This time, the feeling in his breast was not the exultation of a warrior going into battle.

But there was one aspect that was unchanged—the boyish spirit of adventure. It felt very much like turning the page on a new chapter in a grand epic.

"I'm…"

As Julius knelt there, she spoke first.

Julius waited for her to finish. He would wait as long as it took. There was comfort in that because he had faith she would say the right words.

"…I'm Anastasia Hoshin."

"———"

"I want everything in this world… So, handsome mister, what is your name?”

Even though he was still looking down on bended knee, he knew exactly how she would smile, and how she would cock her head. It was as familiar as the back of his hand.

“Milady,” he answered, still kneeling with his face down. “I am Julius Juukulius. Your knight.”

“———”

“You may have forgotten. However, I have sworn my blade to you. I will devote all my strength to support your ambition.”

Placing his sword on the floor, he performed a final bow. Then, at long last, he raised his head.

No matter how his master’s eyes looked, he would have no regrets. Getting flustered, appearing stunned, or letting his head hang were not how a knight should act.

His dream was to always put on airs and be uncompromising about appearances.

As she peered down at that Julius, her round eyes narrowed.

“Really? I can’t say I recall, but…but…”

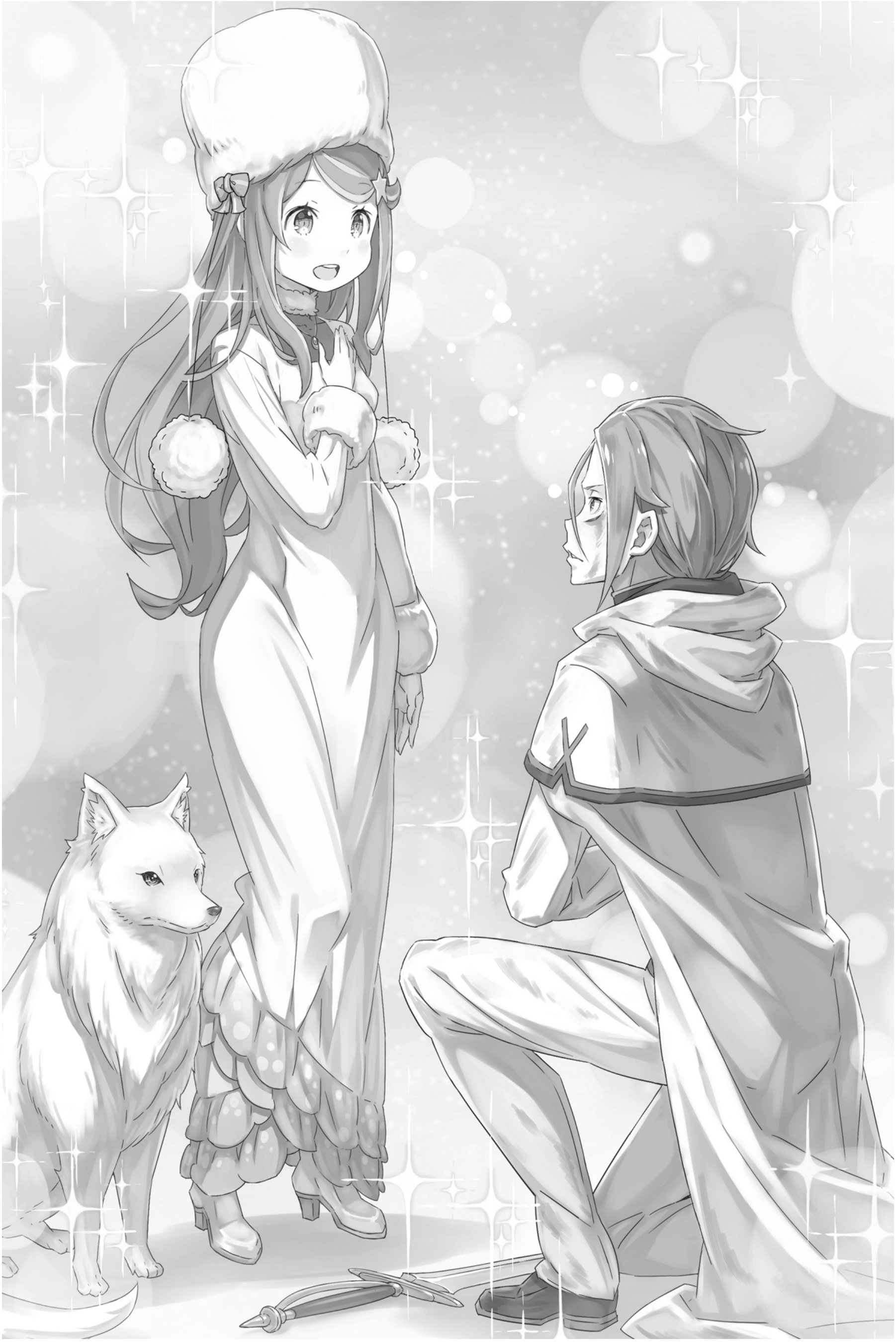
“………”

“The first thing I thought when I saw you…was I gotta have this guy for myself.”

There was a fiery gleam in her eyes. This was the determination to not let go of anything that was unique to his master, the one he had longed for so much. Like a lord and a knight in a fairy tale, it was a sublime scene…

The broken bonds of lord and retainer were renewed on the second floor, Electra. This was the removal of one of the four obstacles that Natsuki Subaru had laid out.

And so the curtain fell on the second floor examination of the Grand Pleiades Library.



CHAPTER 7

RAM

1

She remembered being enveloped in a bright, red blaze that consumed everything.

The tranquil, stagnant, days of degeneration suddenly came to an end.

Pitted against that violence, the title of the strongest demi-human race, the role of the most feared village chief, and the universal affection of a parent protecting their children—it all became meaningless.

To make a short story of it, peace and tranquility had rotted the clan's spirit. The Oni were once considered the strongest race of demi-humans, and it was widely acknowledged that, had they participated in the demi-human war, things might have gone very differently for the Kingdom of Lugunica. Then again, even if that had happened, the Oni would surely not have achieved any great success.

In the first surprise attack, half the village fell, and in the second attack, half again were defeated. By that point, the battle was over.

"Ram! Escape the encirclement! So long as you live!"

The elder's two enormous horns grew longer as the muscles all over his body swelled.

Then he flew out of the house, carrying the longsword that was his weapon as Ram tore into the common soldiers with her wind. The elder told Ram to live, not out of concern for her. But because he was the one who believed most earnestly of all that Ram carried the hope of a bright future for the Oni tribe. The second coming of the Oni god, the glory of the Oni who left a mark on history in the era of the Witch.

That was the heartfelt plea of the last elder of the Oni, who had forgotten how to fight.

She would have liked to laugh it off. It was absurd.

"The glory of the Oni…how pointless."

The fact that the purest Oni blood flowed through her veins was repulsive. It was true that if Ram had grown healthily, she might have been able to answer the elder's prayers. However, that was not what Ram wanted.

She cared little for a future where she played God in such a small, little world. What she wanted was a future worth far more than being worshipped as the second coming of the Oni god and living her life as a symbol of the tribe's long past glory.

—Living as ■■■'s ■■■■■■.

Focusing on her forehead, she drew the blazing mana in her white horn and channeled it throughout her body.

Once her small body was enveloped by wind, Ram ran through the village like a gale.

"■■■."

The ■■■■ of the one person she adored more than anything was on her lips and filled her mind. It wasn't because she was heartless. Her focus had simply changed. Ram's parents had been lost in the first attack and were already beyond saving.

She hadn't hated her parents.

But for better and for worse, the two of them were born in this village, raised in this village, and had chosen to die in this village, and Ram felt that they had unconsciously accepted a quiet end.

Because of that, for them to lose their lives on this night was natural, in a way.

"—However, it's meaningless without retribution."

Black shadows stood in her way. Enemies whose bodies were wrapped in robes.

Ram unleashed an unrestrained wind on the beings swinging cross-shaped swords. Either they had misjudged her because she was a child, or they were simply no match for her. Either way, the black shadows stood no chance against her blades of wind and fell one after the other, creating a pitiful pile of corpses. It didn't stop there as Ram continued her annihilation, dancing among the flames, clad in wind.

Under different circumstances, it probably would've made for a very beautiful performance.

Here, however, each of Ram's swings spilled more blood, and with each foe that fell, a dark thrill filled her.

Something inside urged her to kill more, to spill more blood, rend more flesh, break more bones, steal more life.

This night wasn't the first time she had felt that urge.

It had always been there, from the moment she was born, tempting her at every opportunity.

That desire constantly told her to give herself over to the urges she felt. It wanted to awaken, and so it pleaded with her to kill and destroy.

Ram couldn't understand what about it was so wonderful. The elder and her parents didn't understand, either. But she never felt like sharing it with those who asked Ram for anything beyond simply being herself.

It was like being controlled by her horn.

Without a resolute sense of self, it would have been easy for her young personality to be consumed. Then she truly would have been the second coming of the Oni god those around her so wished her to be.

But that didn't happen. Because…

"—■■■■■■!!!"

A high-pitched voice called out. Ram spun around and saw ■■■ lit by the flames. In an instant, a blast of wind blew away the swarm of black shadows closing in on her, scattering them in a single breath.

And then Ram hurried to her ■■■■■■.

"■■■…"

■■■ had a terrified look in her eyes, and she slumped to the ground as if her legs couldn't support her anymore.

Holding out a hand to her beloved ■■■■■■, she tried to help her to her feet. As the elder wished, she would live through this. But not just her. ■■■ needed to live, too.

Then the situation changed.

While she was confirming that ■■■ was safe, Ram had the briefest lapse in awareness. By the time she noticed the presence of enemies, they had already surrounded her. Getting away would be exceedingly difficult. If she was alone, it wouldn't be impossible. However, surviving alone was no different from death.

Ram had to find a way to break out.

She undid all the fetters restraining her sealed strength and unleashed a rampaging wind, before falling upon her enemies…

"———"

It was an opening in her heart brought about by the all-powerful feeling she so detested.

A shadow slipped beneath her blade of wind and slashed at her, landing a heavy blow on her horn and making her vision explode.

Knocked back by the powerful impact, Ram was suddenly struck by a terrible sense of emptiness.

Then she saw it—a white horn, spinning into the red night illuminated by the inferno consuming the village.

Understanding that it was her horn, a cry of pain and loss welled up from deep inside her. She cried out, but at the same time, she noticed.

For the first time since she had been born, the voice that had been eating away at her all her life fell silent.

To think it had been so simple. Her foolishness was funny to her.

As the horn arced through the red night sky, a thought crossed her mind.

Ahhh, someone finally broke it.

2

In the shared vision from her Clairvoyance, she saw the black ground dragon running away at top speed. On her back was the girl who should have been Ram's precious other half. The partner she couldn't remember. The child who evoked an empty sense of loss…

"…Rem."

Ram's heart trembled with rage as she realized what had happened.

She was loath to admit it, but the power of Subaru's authority had restored a fragment of her omnipotent power. She had used that to overwhelm Lye Batenkaitos and cornered the Archbishop.

However, that had lit a fire in Lye, inspiring a new level of tenacity to cling to life. As a result, Lye had used his authority to escape from Ram with the intent to seize Rem, her other half.

He knew he couldn't win by fighting head-on, so he resorted to whatever underhanded scheme he could think of.

She didn't want to admit it, but his plan was an effective one.

"What a mockery…"

Clairvoyance made it clear that Lye was toying with the fleeing Patrasche. Though he could have cornered her in an instant, he was intentionally indulging in the joy of the hunt. The whole point was to sear this scene into Ram's mind as she watched through her Clairvoyance.

"I won't let you do as you please anymore. I—ah?"

The moment she started to give chase, there was a shift in her vision. Her Clairvoyance almost came undone. In her right eye, she still saw through Lye's eyes, but in her left, her own vision was blurry.

"Kh…aaa…"

It wasn't just her sight. Incredible exhaustion suddenly sapped her, accompanied by a coursing pain that felt like an invisible hand clawing at her insides.

It was unmistakably the burden of a hornless that she normally endured.

"Did…Barusu die? …No, that's not it."

Judging by the relatively light burden, she could confidently say Subaru had not died a pathetic death somewhere. It had only been a few minutes, but considering how much strength she had drawn out, what she was feeling now would pale in comparison to the expected backlash. That suffering would probably leave her coughing up blood and writhing on the floor.

"I assume Barusu's power hasn't completely given out… He must have taken on an excessive burden from someone else unexpectedly… Lady Beatrice…or Meili."

Those were the most likely possibilities. There was little point in dwelling on the cause.

The important takeaway was that right now, it would be difficult for her to wield the level of power that had overwhelmed Lye earlier. She could only undo the first limiter. She wouldn't last even two seconds if she tried it with the second one.

Could she defeat Lye Batenkaitos like that…?

"What are you getting cold feet for? Just devise a new plan."

The longer she hesitated, the worse their odds of victory became.

Steadying herself, Ram rushed up the stairs she had almost slipped on earlier.

As she did, she couldn't shake the feeling that she had done this somewhere before, gasping for air as she rushed to her sister, who was in danger. But where there should have been a memory, there was only a void.

3

"—!!"

The black ground dragon raced through the corridor, bleeding where the thrown short sword had cut into its scales.

The sensible dragon activated its wind-parting blessing and sprinted at full speed to escape the sinister Gluttony, careful not to let the blue-haired girl on her back fall. That was the key to victory here.

It was a commendable effort. Lye had nothing but praise for that drive. However…

"You're a good ground dragon. A hard worker and so faithful to your master. If you were a person, you would surely have been a dish worthy of a gourmand such as ourselves! But, but, but, but but but but but but but but! How sad that a ground dragon can't fill our stomach!"

It didn't matter if they had a will, a soul, memories, a name. Gluttony's authority couldn't consume it from anything other than people.

And so Lye couldn't savor this dragon the way he wanted. Just like how there was no way to eat a painting of food.

"Ahhh, that's it! That's it exactly! When our stomach is sooooooooooooooo empty and we're so hungry! Seeing this picture of a food that looks so delicious is torture. This is child abuse!"

Chasing after the racing dragon, he blew a bit of clotted blood from deep in his nose.

In the fight earlier, his face had been crushed, and something around his right eye must have gotten broken, because it was rolling around freely in its socket. His teeth were shattered, and his tongue was torn. The bleeding in his mouth hadn't stopped, drenching his lower jaw in gore. But none of that mattered.

The thought of Ram seeing this scene right now gave him a thrill that started from the bottom of his heart.

"Sister is…"

Pure, noble, and perfect. A fully perfected being without any faults.

That was what the memories slumbering inside Lye said. After coming exceedingly close to getting killed without being able to do a thing, he agreed it was a fair evaluation. Lye couldn't hold a candle to Ram's true power. If Ram truly got serious, she could probably wring the neck of any Archbishop with ease.

Maybe Regulus could have given her a run for her money with his absolute authority, but…

"There's no way that idiot could kill Sister. Even if she didn't manage to kill him outright, she would just drop him down the Great Waterfalls or something and end it that way."

Even if Regulus couldn't be killed, there were plenty of ways to contain him. Just like the Witch of Jealousy. Even the three great heroes couldn't kill her, so she was still sealed away in a shrine here.

The current Lye was unbelievably proud of Ram and of how wonderful she was.

"As her little sister, we have to show how much we've grown. Anything less would be shameful."

With a swelling sense of purpose, Lye drew more memories out.

One aspect of Gluttony's authority was Eclipse. In essence, the ability was split between Solar Eclipse and Lunar Eclipse, and it was extremely difficult to use.

Lunar Eclipse was a phenomenon that could be seen when the moon disappeared. Put another way, it was something performed by pulling out a memory that he had eaten and re-creating it using his own body. Ordinarily, Lye was perusing memories of all sorts, combining them into the ultimate mixed martial arts. This could be considered the Lunar Eclipse's true domain.

On the other hand, Solar Eclipse was a phenomenon where the sun itself was hidden. Put another way, it was a method for not just re-creating someone's memories, but for embodying their very being, allowing him to use their abilities with the same proficiency as the originals.

However, when he transformed into another person, there was a risk of his mind changing too much to match the body, and so unless there was a pressing reason, Lye and Roy avoided it.

Lye Batenkaitos primarily relied on Lunar Eclipse.

Louis Arneb used Solar Eclipse without concern because she lacked her own body and lacked a solid sense of self to begin with.

But during the battle with Ram, where he was beaten half to death, Lye had broken out of his shell the moment he recreated Leaping Dorkel's Teleportation. He had successfully used the Solar Eclipse that he normally avoided out of fear of losing himself, confirming he could maintain a firm grip on his sense of self.

Now he could more perfectly savor someone's life without any waste.

"Growing in the middle of combat should not be something a withered old husk like us can do, ha-ha! This is perfection! Isn't that right, Sister?!"

Thanks to establishing such a stout consciousness, Lye was feeling better than ever.

He wanted his wonderful sister to see how much he had grown. To do that, he had to pick a method that would provoke her hatred even more.

For example, the person on that ground dragon's back…

"Come to think of it, that's something new. Killing yourself *as* yourself. Maybe this'll lead to something interesting…"

"—!!"

In a wink, the world changed as he leaped through space.

The ground dragon whinnied loudly in shock as Lye suddenly appeared in front when he should have been behind. She tried to race past him without stopping.

"—!!"

"Now, now, don't struggle. You've earned your participation trophy already."

As it passed, he struck like the Fist King, slamming the dragon into the wall. But even as she slumped down and curled in on herself, she did everything she could to protect the girl who fell off her back.

What a heartfelt gesture. However, that spirit was nothing more than a spice for the tragedy to come.

"Know! Your! Place!"

With each word, Lye hammered the black dragon again and again.

The merciless punches broke her cheekbone and front legs. That was more than enough to teach her a painful lesson. Fortunately, Lye couldn't eat the hunched-over dragon's memories, so killing her would be pointless. Besides, he wanted to share the memory of what happened today.

All that remained was…

"To kill Sister's precious Rem with Rem's own—"

"—Spare me such creepy ramblings."

Just as he was about to straddle Rem, a dignified and clear voice called out. He raised his head only to be greeted by two shoe soles landing directly on his face. The impact sent Lye sliding across the floor on his back.

"Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha…you finally caught up, Sister. We…ah? We sisters…we siblings…? …We *Rems* were waiting for you."

He slowly stood up, using only his legs.

And when Ram looked upon her beloved twin, she looked like she was seeing something for the first time.

"…You've become quite ugly in the short time since I last saw you."

4

"…You've become quite ugly in the short time since I last saw you."

That was Ram's honest thought after finally ending a nasty game of tag.

Still borrowing Lye's vision, Ram had dragged along her imperfectly unlocked body in a chase after the battered and beaten ground dragon, and Rem lay beside her.

And standing over Rem was…

"Hideous? That's so mean, Sister… We care so, so, soooo much about you."

An unsettled, inarticulate tone, and thoughts that were distorted in all manner of ways.

It was clear at a glance to Ram—or to anyone, really—that this was the result of a warped mind. Lye's form had become horrifically twisted.

Lye's trump card was supposed to be molding his body according to the memories he had consumed and freely using their abilities. Apparently, it was taboo for a reason. The Gluttony standing before Ram was a product of all those memories, and none of them.

He was a twisted mess.

Parts of him were the bald old man who leaped through space. Other parts included the big, fat man who had taken no damage from Ram's wind blade and the martial artist who had reached a level of strength that was practically divine. There were so many distinctive traits from so many people that it resulted in an absolutely repulsive being.

And Lye seemed completely unaware of his twisted state.

"—?"

He was on the verge of becoming something that was none of them.

A being who was optimized for stealing other people's memories, the powerful ego that was his foundation had grown diluted. And because of that, he was broken.

"And in the end, you became a monster pretending to be Rem? Honestly, I don't know that I've ever been this aggravated."

Ram looked down at the face of her sister, who she knew was the missing piece in her incomplete home. It made her sick to think that she was actually looking at Lye, who had stolen her sister's distinctive characteristics and appearance.

"You did well, Patrasche. Take Rem and fall back."

"*Tsss,*" came the weak response.

Ram stood protectively in front of Patrasche, who was coughing up blood.

With slow, deliberate movements, Patrasche dragged her big body forward and carefully grabbed the collar of Rem's dress with her mouth before she started to leave the battlefield. However…

"That's no good, Sister. That's an important hors d'oeuvre… Before we can serve the entrée, we need to prepare all the fixings, right?"

"—Die."

She stepped forward with a foot that was just about the same size as a person's head and pointed her palm at the face of the person raving like a madman.

The swirling blades of wind she summoned were a small storm that held the force to shred Lye from the neck up. Ram was done holding back.

Her plan to interrogate him instead of killing him to find a way to retrieve consumed memories had put Rem in danger and gotten Patrasche badly wounded, to boot. Given that deranged statement she just heard, Ram concluded the odds of getting a straight answer from Lye were low. On every level, this was the correct choice.

Defeat Lye and relieve Subaru of the burden he was currently carrying for her. Then she would return Patrasche and Rem to the green room before going to aid someone else. That was obviously what she should do.

And as she was thinking that—

"———"

Ram's eyes widened just as the storm was about to shred Gluttony's face.

It was nothing major. Merely a change in Lye's appearance.

However, it was a change that Ram couldn't ignore.

The face that had so many different distinguishing traits was now sporting a single white horn on its forehead.

"Sister."

For a brief moment, Lye spoke in a voice that Rem might have had, with a face that was identical to hers.

Ram's face froze, and Lye's massive arm landed a clean hit on her.

5

It wasn't fatal.

But it wasn't so light that she could be optimistic, either.

Her brain had been rattled, and there was blood trickling from her nose.

Ram knew she had taken a tremendous amount of damage. Her wobbly legs made that painfully obvious.

And the one who had hurt her was the sweet, blue-haired girl with a gentle smile. By virtue of some sick joke, there were three identical faces in the room.

"Cry, Sister."

There was a trace of a plea in her voice and a tear in her faint blue eyes as the fist came down. Ram felt every blow in the marrow of her bones, or perhaps it reached somewhere deeper, like her soul.

"Rage, Sister."

When she bent over after a hit to her stomach, Rem was perfectly lined up for the uppercut that landed on her jaw. She managed to not bite her tongue, but then another punch caught her in the stomach. As she reeled from this hit, she caught an elbow to the head.

"Laugh, Sister."

The affection in that voice tore at Ram's heart with every word.

The only Rem that Ram knew had always been sleeping. The stolen sister who should have been by her side her entire life and yet was nowhere to be found because her memories had been erased.

Ram had looked forward to hearing her voice for the first time when she finally woke up. She didn't know if her memories of her younger sister would return when that time came. Whether they had or not, those first words would have been special to her.

But now…

"Cry." "Rage." "Laugh." "Suffer." "Smile." "Ache." "Pout." "Thrill." "Blush." "Snooze." "Itch." "Marvel." "Celebrate." "—Sister."

"Don't…"

Call me that was what she was about to scream until her mouth was blocked by a palm thrust and she couldn't say anything.

The newly born monster cornered Ram—its power was overwhelming.

There was no hesitation. No limit on the moves it pulled out. No recognition that it was losing itself in the process. And at no point did its face shift. It still looked just like Ram's precious other half.

With both the sun and moon in shadow, darkness had completely cloaked Gluttony's features.

"Sister, Sister, that face isn't like you at all."

Her mistake was corrected by her younger sister, who was wearing a pouting, pleading expression as she struck Ram with her fist. Helpless to stop it from connecting with her chest, Ram felt her ribs creak as she slammed into the wall.

The sturdy stone wall of the Pleiades Watchtower crumbled, and Ram slumped to the ground on the other side.

Rubble filled the air around her, and when she coughed, a dusty, bloody taste filled her mouth. Suddenly, her broken bones and mangled flesh began to shriek.

She spun her head, trying to see where she had ended up.

"…ah."

It was a short, raspy sound.

It was disappointment, or perhaps sentimentality after having an unsatisfying realization.

Ram could see Patrasche and Rem down the hall from where she had fallen. They were separated by maybe a few dozen feet—the time she had bought them was no more than a few scant moments; the pain she had experienced had merely made it feel so much longer.

"Sister, Sister, are you safe?" Lye asked disingenuously.

She could hear Lye's footsteps from the other side of the smoke.

In that moment, Ram coughed up some blood and exchanged a glance with the battered Patrasche.

"*—Tsss.*"

"…Yes, I know. When this is over, let's scold Barusu together."

The truth was that she didn't know what Patrasche had said.

However, it seemed like she had gotten the gist of it, since the black ground dragon didn't correct her.

"———"

Ram had to acknowledge that her judgment had been wrong.

She had played every card and been betrayed by the hand she had drawn.

Ram was aware that she was superior in every regard, but there was one point that she also knew she was lacking—luck.

That was as true now as it was the day her horn was broken and her life as an Oni was also broken.

She had not been especially attached to that way of life. The reason she had considered the white horn growing from her forehead the most unpleasant thing in this world was because it had been a part of her.

And yet here she was, thinking of what she could've done if she still had that horn.

—No, that wasn't exactly it. She did still have the horn.

In fact, it was within reach right now. The wand she always carried with her—its core was Ram's broken horn.

Mana was required to sustain sturdy musculature of the Oni, and their horns were crucial organs for efficiently gathering it.

As a catalyst for magic, there was nothing better for Ram.

Roswaal had gone out of his way to retrieve it and had the wand made special-order for her.

Just by being in a slightly different location, the difference was…

"_______"

Suddenly, a thought crossed Ram's mind. The result of thinking of her horn and the fact that she had overwhelmed Lye once before. Mustering every bit of her knowledge to find a thread of possibility.

Ram with her broken horn, and the sleeping Rem. Roswaal had taken in both of them.

Why had he taken in both Ram and Rem?

"_______"

Ram knew the role that Roswaal wanted her to play.

And she knew of the plan that Roswaal was attempting to carry out.

She had heard that she was a critical part of it, and that she would recognize how when the time came.

So she had no intention of probing until the time she was needed came.

However, in this moment, a certain thought crossed her mind. It was an idea that was crucial to her survival, the survival of the sleeping Rem, and the survival of Patrasche, who had fought for the both of them to live.

It was terribly absurd, but at the same time, comprehension filled her breast.

If it was Ram's beloved Roswaal L Mathers…

"He would do it, with the resolve to be called an inhuman monster."

Ram pulled out the wand on her thigh with a trembling hand.

Looking at the wand she had used for ten years, she slammed it against the wall. Out of the crumbling wand tumbled something she had not seen for a long time.

Spinning unpleasantly, just like the last time.

6

Lye slowly stepped forward, fanning away the rising white dust.

He moved with measured and graceful footsteps that demonstrated a maid's refinement, born from the desire to avoid causing a stir and to avoid bringing shame to one's master.

His dear sister should be slumped somewhere beyond this curtain of smoke. He wanted to see her make every sort of face. He wanted to look straight into those fiery, gleaming pink eyes filled with such powerful emotions. It was an innocent sort of desire, almost like a first love.

"Oh."

On the other side, the first thing he saw was the black ground dragon dragging its legs.

The beast had disappeared from view while he was focused on talking with his sister. He didn't find it particularly interesting, but he had business with the hindrance the dragon was carrying.

He was enough. There was no need for anyone else to adore his dearest sister. Sister was his alone.

"Ah, there you are."

Past the dragon, he spotted the hindrance leaning against the wall.

Her body was propped up perfectly, leaving her neck and heart wide open. Time to tidy up that hindrance and move on to the main dish.

Closing in, Lye noticed it.

—There was a faint glow near her blue-haired head.

"I'll amend my statement."

"—! Sist—"

"I thought I had no luck. But I was wrong."

He started to call out but never got a chance to finish.

An attack crashed into Lye's face first. He was stunned, and the next moment, the impact sent him flying back down the corridor he had walked through.

"—?!"

Unable to dampen the force of the impact, Lye slammed through two walls before coming to a stop. The surprise he felt outpaced the pain, and he stood up just once before slumping to his knees again.

What had happened? Lye's sweet face filled with shock—

"It seems even the heavens are driven mad by how cute Rem and I are."

As Lye peered through the dust filling the hole in the wall made by his body, the next moment, a palm grabbed his face with a speed that outstripped sound.

"…Sis…ter…"

"Unfortunately for you, my sister is sleeping inside. I know this for a fact because of our shared consciousness."

"Shared…"

"That's right—Rem and I are sisters who apparently got along very well. We could share joy and anger, sadness and pain, and more. And the blessing and burdens of our horns as well."

He wasn't following. But what Lye saw with his own eyes confirmed what she was saying.

Before he had been blown away, he had seen a white horn on the sleeping princess's forehead—the one and only way that Oni girl was more gifted than her older sister.

So what if she had that? So what if it was shining and connected?

"It annoys me that Barusu's plan was a hint, but so be it."

"What did Subaru—?"

"Don't say his name with that face and that voice."

Suddenly, Lye's head slammed into the wall with Ram's hand still gripping his face.

His arms and legs twitched and spasmed. Ram opened and closed her other hand, confirming something, and Lye saw a terrible amount of blood flowing from the old wound on her forehead.

But Ram was untroubled by it. She smiled, almost as if she welcomed it.

Like the blood and pain was proof of a lost bond being reconnected.

"Those born in a dark place should return to their holes. If you were born screaming, then you can die that way, too."

Wiping the blood from her forehead with the back of her hand, she looked down at Lye with her pink eyes.

Everything he had planned was so he could see intense emotion in them.

What the Archbishop of Gluttony got from Ram was an ice-cold gaze.

7

She'd had a suspicion since long ago.

The plan of Roswaal L Mathers, the master she had sworn to serve, required the death of the dragon that protected the Kingdom of Lugunica to achieve his final goal.

It was more than a decade ago that he had told Ram she was a crucial piece in that plan.

Saving Ram and ■■■ in that burning Oni village, Roswaal had asked for compensation.

And Ram decided to pay that price in exchange for the Oni tribe's retribution.

For that sake, she would aid him, whether it was a plan to kill the dragon or whatever else.

"When the time comes, you'll know. The role that you—that only you and your ■■■■■■—can perform."

She recalled the fragmentary memory of when her master had told her his plan to kill the dragon.

Mysteriously, she had never once thought deeply about it before today…

"I finally understand…what Lord Roswaal's aim is."

All of Roswaal's actions were for the sake of the final goal he had spent his extraordinarily long life pursuing.

For its sake, he had positioned himself at the foundation of the

Kingdom. He had saved Ram and ■■■. He asserted authority over the Sanctuary and its trials. He had tested Natsuki Subaru.

She realized now why he had taken in Ram and ■■■. ■■■ had been adopted as a replacement for Ram's lost horn. Together, Ram and ■■■ were one unit, an Oni that would kill the dragon.

Of course, even Roswaal couldn't escape the effects of Gluttony's authority.

Effectively, he should also have forgotten why he had kept ■■■ at his estate. However, even if he had forgotten, he had surely realized his own intentions.

And even seeing them so earnest to rescue ■■■ from the damage Gluttony had caused, he had said not a thing.

He is so utterly…

"There's no changing that meticulous side of him."

Despite Subaru setting his plan back, Roswaal continued working at it beneath the surface, ever vigilant. It was a truly troublesome part of his character, she thought in exasperation.

However, something else occurred to her—was the reason Roswaal had given Ram permission to join this trip with ■■■ because he had predicted the possibility of something like this happening?

It might be overthinking. Perhaps it was a delusion born from her adoration of the man.

"Either way, it feels better to think that the man I love trusts me."

She chose to believe that he sent Ram knowing she would protect ■■■ and the others. Similarly, she chose to believe that she had noticed Roswaal's hidden intent, and that she had turned over his trump card to kill the dragon, of her own volition.

It was much more comfortable to think that the man Roswaal L Mathers valued the ten years he had spent with the woman Ram.

And so…

"—I'm in excellent spirits right now. Stand there and be my punching bag."

"Sisterrrrr!"

Still holding his face, she slammed Lye to the ground. Limbs quivering, Gluttony's shape transformed.

Though he still maintained Rem's appearance, his arms and legs swelled to different sizes on his right and left, growing and shrinking. He didn't seem to be in control of the changes as his body instinctively tried to find the optimal response.

His mind was in shambles, and his sense of self was long gone. He was truly repulsive.

"Fool."

Lying on the floor, Lye moved his large, unbalanced body, forcefully tearing himself from Ram's grasp and leaping to his feet. Ram didn't hesitate to close the distance once more when he swung his log-like arm at her.

She was bleeding from her forehead. But the pain and the emptiness she felt made Ram's Oni blood boil.

It was infuriating. This…euphoria had always tormented her. The loathsome instinct that reveled in combat and displays of strength, the desire to kill enemies who deserved death. Ram had always hated it.

That was why, when her horn was broken that night, she had thought she was finally free.

"It's ironic."

Ram grabbed the log-like arm and threw Lye over her shoulder. Once he slammed into the ground, she kicked his head, sending him farther down the hall.

She wouldn't let him get any closer to the wounded ground dragon or to the girl leaning against the wall behind her.

"———"

There was a faint glow from the white horn on the sleeping girl's forehead.

Ordinarily, so long as she was unconsciously sleeping, even if she was an Oni, she should not have been able to activate her horn. It had been forcibly awakened by the connection of shared consciousness.

A bond between two beings so closely related by blood that could not be denied even if Ram lost her memory.

The reason she had believed her connection to Rem without being able to speak to her this past year was because of that.

So it was merely chance that she had noticed how to take advantage of their shared consciousness here.

Annoyingly, it had been thanks to Subaru's idea. Because he had helped carry a portion of Ram's burden with his odd ability, giving her the strength to fight. That had given her the idea to try something similar.

Two beings bound by a shared consciousness also shared powerful emotions, and at times even wounds and pain. She didn't understand how it worked, exactly, but there was a theory in a book that Beatrice had read in the forbidden archive once.

Shared consciousness was a product of two individuals being linked by Odo.

Odo was the fundamental source of all power that existed deep within people—some would call it a soul.

It could also be used to cast magic in place of mana, but fundamentally, Odo was the essence of what made a person who they were. It was a domain where none could trespass, but as two beings born of the same womb, their Odo had become interlinked, naturally creating a shared consciousness. That was the theory, at least.

In the end, Beatrice had brushed it off as a folk explanation, but Ram personally liked it.

Being connected to someone else like that made for a wonderful story.

And if that connection with someone really did exist…

"…I would surely love that child from birth."

Even as baby, she wouldn't have hesitated to protect that bond, no matter the cost.

She would give everything to protect it, cherish it, shower it with affection, and love it.

So…

"Forgive me for being a bad sister, burdening you at a time like this."

Using their shared consciousness, she was sharing her burden with her sleeping sister.

All because Subaru's authority had shown her how. Ram could replicate most things, as long as she'd experienced them once before. Subaru's ability was similar—in his case, it probably forcibly linked his Odo and the Odo of others, creating a one-sided sort of shared consciousness.

If he wanted, he could have sent the burden he experienced over to her, but Subaru was a fool, so he wouldn't do that. Instead, he one-sidedly took everything upon himself to decrease the burden on his allies.

"Fool…"

It was the same thing she had just said to Lye.

However, the meaning behind that word could not have been more different.

Ram re-created the effects of Subaru's authority using the shared consciousness connecting her and Rem. She didn't know what had happened on Subaru's end. But it was probably at least a little better now. And as a bonus, this allowed her to escape from the repulsive situation of staying connected to Subaru for so long.

Instead, she poured her burden into Rem, but…

"______"

Still sleeping, Rem said nothing.

She just dutifully continued supplying mana from her horn into the white horn placed in her hands—Ram's broken horn that had been remade as her wand.

There was no way for Ram to know how Rem's body was being affected by the massive amounts of mana she needed to draw out. This needed to be a short, decisive battle.

"Sister!!!"

Lye leaped at Ram with a wild howl.

He had used the power of Leaping Dorkel's Teleportation, a magical art that erased the distance between them in the blink of an eye—but even that phantasmic technique was meaningless.

Ram had seen it already.

"So slow, half-wit. I'll be an old lady by the time you reach me."

By peeking at her opponent's vision with Clairvoyance, she could preemptively foil any attacks. Grabbing the five fingers thrusting toward her, she bent them backward, then drove her elbow into his neck. She topped it all off with a roundhouse kick that sent him hurtling into the wall.

"Kah…"

"Though even in old age, I would still be cute."

She grabbed him by the collar and heaved him up, only to bash his head into the ground. And then she slammed her heel down on his face, smashing his nose.

Cleanly evading his outstretched arms, she hammered him with a barrage of wind blades from a distance.

"—Giiiaaaaaa!!!"

"Such a hideous cry for such a pretty face."

As blood spurted from the cuts running up and down his body, Lye backed away.

His body kept shifting without settling on any one form, but from start to finish, from the neck up, he wore a familiar face.

The sight made Ram want to vomit. That wouldn't be very elegant, though, so she refrained from actually doing it.

"______"

Bleeding terribly, Lye charged without any particular skill or technique.

More precisely, he was probably using some sort of impossibly masterful move. He had probably merged the abilities of various incredible individuals, creating a technique that no one could emulate.

Ram crushed those attacks optimized from so many different angles with sheer fighting skill that surpassed them all.

A hundred, a thousand grand techniques, crushed by the strength of a billion. That was what this battle had become.

Unlike with Subaru, Ram's connection with Rem was familiar and comfortable. She removed another two limiters.

She was probably at around 50 percent of when she was in her prime—actually, considering how much she had developed since then, she was probably stronger now. And not succumbing to that power was Ram's strength.

"Breaking my horn turned out to be for the best."

Were it not for that night, she might have given in to the lure of her horn someday.

She would have liked to say it was impossible, but she couldn't answer that with any certainty. So Ram held her head high, proud of the path she had walked, choosing to believe it was right.

Thanks to losing her horn, she managed not to become the Oni that she so despised.

"Besides, if that night never happened, I would never have been able to meet Lord Roswaal. That isn't ideal."

After coming to the conclusion that there was nothing better than the route she had taken, Ram thrust her palm forward.

Lye appeared from space, right in front of where she thrust her hand. As the shock of having his path read spread across his face, she grabbed him by it again.

"You can't leap again so soon, right? I'm bored of your tricks. And your face, too."

"Wai—!"

"No," Ram fired back coolly.

Still holding his face, she generated blades of wind from her palm.

In an instant, they tore through his eyes, nose, lips, ears—everywhere on his face.

"Aaargh, aaaaaaaaarghhhhh!!!!"

With a bloody scream, crying tears of blood, Lye writhed on the floor.

Looking down at him, Ram showed no sign of mercy, bearing down on the groaning Archbishop.

Hearing her footsteps approach, Lye changed his shape.

His new form was tall and burly. He batted down the oncoming fist, but Ram broke his knee.

Kicked down, Lye changed to escape Ram.

A big, bearded man, strengthening his defenses by curling up—she kicked his body up into the air, slamming him against the ceiling in a barrage of punches, turning him into a slack mass of flesh beneath that tough skin he was so proud of.

Lye changed shape once again to kill Ram, who was subjecting him to an endless torture.

This time, it was the bald old man with the phantasmic art. His trick had already been revealed, and Ram almost pitied him when she caught him. It didn't stop her from dragging his face across the wall with all her might.

"Abwabahwababwaaaah!!!!"

Under the force of Ram's grip, Lye's whole body began to wear down from the incredible friction. He couldn't escape, so his body shifted while still in Rem's grip, seeking the right answer.

Responding to each and every one of his changes, Ram held a service for the hundreds upon thousands of victims who had been absorbed by Gluttony. The techniques they had polished, the paths they had walked, the emotions they had felt… All of it had been violated and defiled. Ram used every bit of strength she had to give them some semblance of peace.

Their techniques, paths, and emotions would never be used again by this man.

Because none of them worked on Ram.

“Take responsibility for your own actions.”

She pulled his arm and threw what was the battered defiler.

Rolling through the corridor, Lye shuddered and twitched. His figure slowly, slowly began to change.

He changed, relying on countless memories…

“Oh, it’s been a while. I wanted to see that face. The third from the top of the list, though.”

“…Ah, gahaah.”

Wiping the blood from her forehead, her lips softening. She was looking upon Lye’s true face.

This was him in the truest sense. Not the shortsighted being who had borrowed the faces and tricks of others, but Lye’s original body and face.

No matter who he became, no matter who he relied on or clung to, he couldn’t escape from himself. Just as Ram couldn’t change the fact that she was an Oni, even if her horn was broken. Just as there was no changing the fact that Ram was Rem’s sister, even if she lost her memories.

“Did you want to struggle with your own strength in the end?”

“———”

“That reminds me, you said something curious on the stairs. You have a brother and sister. Why not stand tall for your siblings?”

As Lye slumped over, his painfully ragged breathing suddenly stopped.

It wasn’t that he had died. Ram’s words had elicited this reaction.

Brother and sister. When he heard that, his breathing calmed down ever so slightly. Slowly, Lye raised his body…

“Our…our…sister. Don’t…”

“Don’t lay a hand on her? Do you really think you’re in a position to say that? Have you ever helped someone who pleaded with you for mercy?”

“Even…so…”

“———”

Twisting his bloodied face, Lye pleaded with a tearful voice.

Ram’s eyes narrowed slightly at hearing that pained request. And then, exhaling, she closed her eyes and said:

"I'll—"

"—You're too kind, Sister."

The moment he escaped her eyes, Lye disappeared, leaving only those words behind.

Using Leaping Dorkel's Teleportation ability, he disappeared without a trace.

—The man had fled.

8

"Ha-ha! Aha-ha-ha! Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

With Leaping Dorkel's ability at his fingertips, Lye fled from Ram.

The reckless thought of trying to eat Ram had completely left his mind. He chose to run without concern for appearances.

It was impossible. He couldn't win. He couldn't win against that.

That was a being that wouldn't grace a gourmet's plate or a dumpster's plate.

"Sorry, Louis and Roy, but…! Gourmet food requires the proper preparation."

Putting pressure on the wounds covering his entire body, Lye sneered at his siblings, who were after the same prey.

Louis had left the battlefield early, and Roy was rampaging somewhere else at the moment. If that Oni could go after the two of them, he would be free to run away without being hounded.

Roy with his willingness to eat anything didn't know when to pull back, so he might finally die here, but there was no helping that.

If anything, he was fed up with Roy's appetite. He devastated their hunting grounds as much as he wanted and had probably stolen some of the delectable bits that should have been Lye's to enjoy.

—No, could anything his brother ate at this point truly be considered gourmet?

"Useless, every last one of them…agh, damn it! Damn it! Damn it! Something like that, something like that existed! It would be better if we had never known!!!"

It wasn't the emotion evoked by a younger sister who adored her elder sister.

It was a feeling of yearning for an immeasurable, absolute being—a powerful emotion that took form inside Lye, a desire born from the truest depths of his heart.

He wanted to consume every bit of her. He wanted to savor her body and soul.

As the standard-bearer of true gourmands, he had intended to consume only the finest ingredients and sample every sort of emotion.

But now that he knew what true gourmet cuisine was, everything else in the world seemed bland in comparison. Everything that Lye Batenkaitos, Archbishop of Gluttony, had gathered in the belief of its value crumbled away, turning to dust.

The dinner table that had once seemed so vibrant and glimmering had devolved into a sandbox filled with mud balls.

"We want that."

He would cast aside anything and everything for a chance to taste that flavor.

He would give up all the things he had built up and not feel any regret.

He didn't want to taste anything else. He didn't want to satisfy himself with anything else.

"Obgh, ugh."

Vomit leaked from the corner of his mouth as he ran.

It wasn't due to the pain he was suffering. The cause was far more unbearable. Things he had believed to be the finest were not. Now that he had glimpsed the ultimate delicacy, everything that filled him was disgusting in comparison.

Why had he ever thought anything less could be wonderful? Why had he praised any of it? How had he been content until now?

How could he call himself a gourmet if he was satiated by food besides the truly wonderful—?

"Ah, right. Right, right, of course, it has to be, that's why! Gluttony! Gluttony!"

He cried out with a welling hunger, a satiated hunger, and begged from his heart.

He wanted to become one, to merge with her. If hunger could encompass a being outside itself, then the gluttony that drove him was an extreme form of love.

"That's right! This is love! Sister…no, *Ram*! We love yo—!"

Just as he was about to scream with the emotion that had taken root inside him, his words were suddenly cut off.

The reason was a new pain.

"…Ah?"

Touching his cheek, Lye saw his palm covered in blood.

A new cut had torn his cheek open while he had been trying to flee the tower. But all he could see was empty space.

"______"

Silently stretching out his finger, Lye watched as his fingertip got sliced open.

There was an invisible blade hanging in empty space.

"Hah."

It was the same technique he had shown Ram on the spiral staircase.

The technique of setting invisible blades in space was the skill of a legendary shinobi, though Lye had long ago forgotten whose memories that had come from, so it didn't matter much.

The problem was there being a blade *here*. Lye didn't remember placing this one.

"Could it…?"

Dodging the blade that had left a shallow cut in his finger, Lye pushed on—only for his toes to go flying.

He recoiled with a shriek of pain. That was when a blade touched the back of his head. His face tensed, and he froze in place.

He was surrounded by invisible blades.

"…Ha-ha…seriously?"

He had only shown it once.

Exactly once in battle, and it was an invisible technique, so it wasn't like she had actually seen it.

More importantly, she never even passed this way earlier. And yet she had accurately predicted the direction he would take and preemptively placed invisible blades.

She had not let Lye escape. Her eyes were tracking him even now.

"Hee-ha-ha."

Lye laughed. There was nothing else he could do.

He loved her. It was the first time he had yearned so strongly for something. He was head over heels for her impossible strength.

And…

"Ah! Wait, wait please! Wait just a little! Just a little bit longer is enough! Just a little bit more!"

No matter how much he pleaded with her through her Clairvoyance, it couldn't carry his voice. He knew that. His desperate shouts were not for her—they were to urge himself forward.

In a panic, Lye clung to the wall beside him. He had been too quick to abandon all that he had eaten. If he had just kept the Fist King's ability, it wouldn't have been so much work.

Saving those thoughts for later, Lye hit the invisible blade with his arms. Both of his hands fell off, and blood spurted from his wrists.

Owww. Owww. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. But that doesn't matter now.

"Accept our feelings! Witness our plea!"

He pushed his bleeding arms against the wall, and with all his might, he frantically wrote.

Every bit of his small body was dedicated to writing massive letters on the wall of the tower in dark blood.

"Pwah."

Stepping back and opening his right eye wide, he admired his work. He hoped this bloody message he wrote would reach the person he desired, from the depths of his heart. If it was her, he was sure she would watch to the very end, overlapping with him all the way.

"We lov—"

—Before the Archbishop of Gluttony could finish what he was saying, his head was sent flying by a blade of wind.

9

"Fulla."

Waving her finger, Ram said just one word.

Chasing after the fleeing Gluttony, Ram sent just a single blade of wind.

She had easily tracked his location using her Clairvoyance. She had set a little trick to slow him and be sure her aim was true, but it had done well for rushed work.

And just before the final blade reached him, Gluttony had done something nonsensical.

Cutting his own arms off, he had written a message in blood on the wall.

It was a malicious harassment, repulsive, one-sided, and not worth even looking at, but…

“______”

After watching him scrawl that bloody message until the moment his life was extinguished, Ram finally allowed herself to close her eyes.

She had watched because she couldn’t rest until she was sure he was dead. Not because she felt even the slightest obligation to watch over him in his final moments.

The defiler had bungled his last choice.

If he had been concerned about the lives of his siblings, Ram might have considered showing him a bit of mercy. Instead, he used them as bait to deceive her in a desperate bid to keep himself alive.

He probably didn’t know how to return what he had eaten. If he did, he would have offered it for a chance to save himself. But he had not. Of course he received his just deserts.

“Live by the blade, die by the blade. Those who cling to magic will fall to magic. Any who rely on fire will perish by the flames. And Oni always pay their debts.”

That was the logic of retribution that Ram followed.

She finally lowered her arm and took a long breath. Then she turned around and started heading back to the ravaged hallway. She couldn’t fight too close to that place, so she had intentionally put distance between it and Lye.

Bothered by that sense of distance, Ram naturally hurried her feet.

“*—Tsss.*”

When she emerged from the broken wall, Ram was greeted by a ground dragon’s high-pitched whinny.

The pitch-black dragon was deftly hiding Rem behind her body. She clearly intended to be a shield in the worst case, if Ram had not been the one to return.

Even as battered as she was, she still diligently followed Subaru’s orders.

She really is wasted on Subaru…

"Or is it that you wanted to protect Rem, too?"

"______"

"I see… Good girl, Patrasche."

She gently rubbed the ground dragon's neck.

Given the severity of her wounds, Patrasche clearly needed to return to the green room. As loyal as she was, she was too badly hurt to force herself anymore.

Ram didn't want to ask the impossible from the person—the dragon—who had protected her sister.

Praising Patrasche's efforts, Ram moved to Rem, who was hidden behind her.

She had already ended the horn resonance that had connected them earlier. The horn on her forehead had receded. However, the effect of her bearing the load of Ram's Oni god strength had surely been a heavy burden.

Thinking of the consequences that would hit her before long was already making her heavyhearted.

However…

"Now isn't the time for such terrible thoughts."

Slowly kneeling there, Ram touched her sleeping sister's cheek.

Her bond with a sister that she couldn't recognize had become more solid than ever before, and her heart swelled with love and adoration.

She had lived with her broken horn, losing the strength of the second coming of the Oni god, up until this day.

Ram had always believed that blazing night had been what made her who she was, and she didn't think that was a bad thing.

But today it changed.

The reason Ram's horn had been broken that day was…

"—So that I could know we are sisters today."

Through their shared consciousness, she could tell when their souls touched that they were twins. No one in this world could possibly replace her sister.

"I want to talk to you even more than before. How did we spend our time together? What sort of past did we live? Let's fill the gaps of our missing memories together."

As long as time kept flowing, future memories would continue piling up. To make sure those wouldn't disappear and to protect them from vanishing without warning, she would share her memories every night.

"Let's talk of all our yesterdays."

The sleeping princess didn't respond.

But refusing to let it end on that silence, Ram smiled.

And then her lips moved, this time without any doubt about how she felt.

"—I love you, Rem."

No matter what may come to pass, that feeling would never change.

By chance, it was the same sentiment the twisted Archbishop had spoken in his final moments, but even if it was the same words, the meaning simply was not comparable.

It sounded different coming from someone who lived for love, rather than from someone who didn't understand the first thing about it.

It would never have the same ring to it.

CHAPTER 8

—I ASK THY WILL

1

It was crucial to form a solid mental image to mold the ice into the shape she wanted.

When Subaru first suggested Icebrand Arts to her, Emilia had thought it sounded incredibly useful but wasn't sure whether she would be able to do it.

"Don't worry! You'll be fine! I'm sure you can!"

She remembered how Subaru had smiled and given her a reassuring thumbs-up when she mentioned her concern.

Thinking back on that now, she realized it had been baseless—no, he had given her a supportive push because he liked her.

In the process of learning to create the weapons she imagined, Emilia had practiced drawing a lot. Unlike music, drawing wasn't really her strong suit, but even so, practicing drawing picture after picture together with Subaru, she had noticeably gotten better.

Ram was exasperated at seeing Emilia drawing things together with Subaru and Beatrice, while Otto just smiled wearily. Frederica and Petra occasionally joined in, and Garfiel would give her advice about ways to improve. Once in a while, Roswaal watched from afar while Emilia and Beatrice drew things together.

To Emilia, those were precious memories that she couldn't bring herself to let go of.

She might have disappeared from everyone's minds, but those were memories that Subaru still had, too. And that thought gave her a nice, warm feeling in her chest.

"Turn that into courage with a heave!"

Emilia steeled her resolve and faced the Holy Dragon Volcanica with ice weapon in hand, accompanied by her seven ice soldiers.

A mental image was absolutely crucial in forming the ice properly.

That applied to her weapons, of course, but it was the same for the ice soldiers, too. Naturally, they had taken a shape that was easy for Emilia to visualize. And that was why Emilia was fighting alongside seven Natsuki Subarus.

"But they're even stronger than the real Subaru, and more nimble, too!"

Subaru didn't lose in terms of cheerfulness or mischievousness, but the soldiers made of ice were built differently at a fundamental level. Their toughness relied on the density of Emilia's mana, and it would be a mistake to assume they were the same as regular ice sculptures. Like her summoned weapons, they were as tough as steel.

"Go!"

Following her orders, a soldier charged forward and entered Volcanica's range.

Volcanica lingered near the large pillar in the center of the first floor, unmoving. Judging from the tail swipe earlier, the dragon's range was around twenty feet—

In an instant, as if sensing a determination to take the pillar, Volcanica's blue tail moved at high speed.

It tore a hole in the air itself. That was the only explanation Emilia could think of to explain the odd noise she heard. An instant later, the lead soldier's upper body shattered, and the head that wore the same mean glare as Subaru went flying.

"Sorry! But that means it isn't just me being targeted."

She felt bad for the soldier that she had used to test her theory, but now she was sure she knew what Volcanica's aim was.

The Holy Dragon had been left behind, forgetting even about the examination, but even so, its determination to intercept all who tried to confront the pillar remained.

It did not matter whether they were alive or not. In which case, she had a plan.

"Please, soldiers!"

"—Thou who hath reached the tower's peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor."

Sensing the approaching soldiers, the Holy Dragon spoke again, but those words had become a meaningless string of noises.

Emilia felt a terrible loneliness at seeing the figure before her who had become a deaf puppet. Volcanica had been trying to protect something so much that it had ended up in this terrible state.

She didn't know who or what it was, or why Volcanica had made such a promise, but…

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."

"Form a line!"

Aiming to stop the dragon's tail movements, she had five soldiers line up shoulder to shoulder.

Another odd sound came from the Holy Dragon's tail as it swung hard to sweep them aside. The movement was similar to how Subaru's whip moved, but the speed and force were on a completely different level. Emilia could grab Subaru's whip out of the air with her hand, but she couldn't manage that with the dragon's tail.

It swept away the five ice soldiers lined up together and crouching to hold on. However, once Emilia knew it was coming, she knew a way to deal with it. The ice soldiers were sturdier and thicker.

Even as their bodies cracked, the soldiers who resembled Subaru smirked. And the last soldier leaped out from behind the line of five who had been enough to stop exactly one strike.

The final ice soldier alone had a different mission. It wielded what looked like a polearm with two forks meant to safely pin a person to the ground. With the half circle formed by the two forks, the ice soldier pinned the tail against the ground to prevent another attack and—

"—Thou who hath reached the tower's peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor."

The six ice soldiers started celebrating with high fives when a sound rang out and their bodies shattered.

Completely erased from the hips up, what was left of the ice soldiers collapsed. They hadn't been defeated by the tail wriggling free, but by Volcanica's claws.

As its tail was immobile, Volcanica swung its left front leg instead. The enormous force of the blow was more than enough to kill Emilia if she had been any less careful.

"If your tail and legs are fine, then…argh! Why is your head the only thing empty?!"

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."

"I know that already!"

If it was anyone other than Emilia, that repeated message would probably have made them even more angry.

Even as she listened to it again, Emilia had too bold a spirit to break. All that had broken were the ice soldiers. And there was no need to cry over them.

As Emilia ran, seven spears passed overhead as they hurtled toward the Holy Dragon. They had come from the ice soldiers that had been re-formed in their starting positions. Emilia couldn't create more than seven at once, but she could remake them when they shattered.

Her soldiers would keep standing back up so long as Emilia didn't run out of strength. Just like the real Natsuki Subaru.

"—Thou who hath reached the tower's peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor."

"Kyah?!"

Volcanica swatted down the flying spears with its front leg.

The attack seemed almost to tear through space, creating a shock wave that made it look like the tracks of its claws would just continue forever, swallowing Emilia, the ice soldiers, and the entire first floor in a raging storm.

"Please!"

Just before being swallowed up by that blast, Emilia stepped closer to the pillar. She was confident in her athletics, but that alone wouldn't be enough to carry her to the pillar from there… Still, this was enough.

The first ice soldier that re-formed dropped low and pressed its hands together. It acted as a springboard when Emilia stepped onto its hands, giving her a powerful boost when she leaped into the air.

Her aim wasn't the pillar itself. It was—

"—the top!"

She soared high above, clearing Volcanica's head and coming very close to the pillar. From there, if she just touched the very top—

"…Eh?"

Right as her fingers were about to meet the pillar, there was a quiet wave of heat that came from down below.

—No, it wasn't silent. The force and heat were so great that it drowned out all sound. As the very concept of sound apparently failed, it was no surprise that Emilia didn't hear anything.

What she did notice was the destruction of all the ice soldiers on the first floor.

The one that had boosted her jump, the four that had supported her advance by throwing spears of ice, and the two racing to add more restraining polearms—they'd all disappeared.

They hadn't been vanquished by Volcanica's tail or front legs.

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."

She could hear the very air crackling even as those words remained as solemn as ever.

When that repeated phrase reached her ears yet again, Emilia realized that sound had finally returned to the world. At the same moment, her fingers latched on to the pillar.

Somehow managing to steady her grip, Emilia looked down.

The floor below her was glowing white.

A few spots were still steaming, but there was no other trace of the ice soldiers that should have been standing down there. That showed how intense the heat must have been, never mind the force and destructive power…

Holy Dragon Volcanica's breath had incinerated everything.

And…

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."

Emilia's eyes shot open as she watched Volcanica spread its blue wings and rise.

"Not good!"

Realizing the danger after seeing what had happened below, Emilia frantically reached out for the top of the pillar.

While she was doing that, Volcanica rose, freeing its tail from the restraining polearms, and slowly opened its wings with very deliberate movements.

The Holy Dragon intended to take flight.

Volcanica could obviously fly, but Emilia had never seen a flying dragon, so she couldn't really picture it in her head.

Could something that big even stay in the air?

"I've never seen anything other than Puck or Roswaal flying…"

It seemed natural to Emilia that Puck could fly, since he was a spirit, and that Roswaal could fly, because he was an eccentric mage, of course. She had heard once that in the Volakian Empire to the south, there were flying dragons in addition to the familiar ground dragons and water dragons, but was Volcanica the same sort of flying dragon?

Or was it a fundamental mistake to group them together…?

"Heave! Ho! Heave! Ho!"

Emilia pulled herself up the pillar as fast as she could.

Anyone watching from a distance would have been blown away by her sheer speed, but even with her unexpected strength and a head start, Emilia didn't get far enough.

"—Thou who hath reached the tower's peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor."

It wasn't her imagination that that voice sounded much closer than before. It wasn't coming from far down below but from about the same height.

The massive Holy Dragon was somehow flying in the air with its blue wings.

Volcanica rose grandly in the sky above the desert and showed no sign of decline or deficiency.

Everything from the pressure it gave off to its piercing gaze—and not to mention the tail, claws, and breath—were proof that this was the ultimate dragon spoken of in legends.

The only thing that betrayed that image was…

"I! Am trying to go higher than the first floor! I might not be your enemy!"

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."

Speaking over her, like it wanted to show it had no interest in listening, Volcanica loomed menacingly over Emilia as she clung to the pillar. Then it swung its tail, threatening to crush Emilia and the pillar along with her…

“———”

She quickly pulled her body up and escaped a direct hit. Unfortunately, the blow to the pillar made her lose her grip, and a weightless feeling quickly enveloped her body.

She fell, wasting all the effort she had put into climbing so high—until she stopped.

“Kyah!”

Emilia should have dropped tens of yards, given how far she had climbed. However, her bottom landed on something much sooner than she expected.

Reaching down, her hand felt something rugged and hard…

“Did…?”

“—Thou who hath reached the tower’s peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor.”

Emilia heard the voice from extremely close as the high-altitude breeze whipped at her face, and she felt the surface she was sitting on. Emilia finally realized what had happened. She had fallen onto Holy Dragon Volcanica’s back.

“—Gah! This isn’t the time to doze off! If I’m here, then—”

She could use Volcanica as a launchpad to grab back on to the pillar.

That idea quickly came to Emilia, but just as quickly, she realized that would be easier said than done.

Volcanica flapped its wings and began to ascend while simultaneously twisting its body to shake her off.

“—Uh, ughhhhh!”

Enduring the powerful wind buffeting her, Emilia desperately clung to the dragon’s back.

It was a gale unlike any she had experienced before—she was clinging to scales that were each large and sturdy, like boulders, but she couldn’t hold on long.

“—If I fall, I won’t be able to see Subaru and the others again.”

If she wasn’t careful opening her mouth, the rushing wind threatened to tear at her lungs.

She put her head down, gritted her teeth, and, behind closed eyes, Emilia thought of all the people who were precious to her.

It was almost like she was preparing mentally to face death. But that wasn’t it.

When people were on the verge of crumbling under the pressure of fear or unease, they often closed their eyes. But when she did that, the people Emilia saw internally all faced forward, even—and especially—in moments like this. In moments like this, they didn’t shut themselves off from the world.

She had to open her eyes.

To reach, to take someone's hand and…

"—That weirdo."

Up, down, left, right. Everything everywhere was blue.

The reason for that was partly because she was high up in the sky, above the clouds, but also because the Holy Dragon she was clinging to had dazzling blue scales.

Everything else was moving past so fast that even with Emilia's high visual acuity that could see the seams on a thrown ball, she couldn't track the world passing by her.

And so what Emilia's consciousness latched on to wasn't the blue world outside.

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."

It was Volcanica, twisting and turning its body as it flew.

It seemed that the spot Emilia was clinging to was near the base of one of Volcanica's wings. Strangely, the dragon wasn't moving its wings that much. Birds and insects flapped their wings so much to fly, but the way a dragon flew was apparently very different.

It was probably closer to the way that Puck or Roswaal flew.

In which case…

"Roswaal uses magic…and Puck has some kind of mysterious power."

Unfortunately, she had never tested it with Roswaal and had never thought to test it before, either. But Emilia had spent a long, long time with the being that she had thought of as her one and only family. She had been so sad so many times this year, away from his side. She had wanted to cry many nights, but her memories of him had comforted her.

And calling upon those memories, even in this moment, Emilia saw a glimmer of hope.

That was…

"Do you not like having your neck tickled?"

Forcing her purple eyes open, she saw the Holy Dragon's long neck. And beneath the grand dragon's chin, amid so many blue scales lined up so neatly, there was a single white scale.

—She thought back to the days she had spent playing with Puck.

"Don't do that, Lia. If you tickle me, it'll mess up my focus."

"…Right, Puck."

Emilia focused.

With the wind buffeting her, Emilia had no way of directly reaching that white scale. But she had a way of reaching out even where her own hands couldn't reach.

"—Mr. Soldiers."

Focusing her consciousness, she manifested more ice soldiers around the white scale.

Growing half out of the dragon’s body, their upper bodies all supported one another. And the one who formed in the center of them slowly reached out to touch that white scale—

“——GGGGHH?!”

For the first time, the Holy Dragon uttered something other than its repeated message.

3

There is a word, *nilin*.

In ancient Chinese folklore, on the neck of the mystical, legendary being, was a single inverted scale that wasn’t to be touched, called the “nilin.” Touching it would incite the dragon’s rage, and all who did would assuredly be killed by the dragon.

Based on that folklore, the phrase *to touch the nilin* became a metaphor for bringing up a subject that should never be discussed.

Of course, Emilia had no way of knowing the folklore and origins of terminology from a different world. Her goal in touching that white scale on the dragon’s neck was to disrupt its concentration as it flew around, trying to shake her off.

However…

“Aaaaaaah!!!”

Emilia cried out as the world spun around her. She had been hurled clear, as expected. However, the weightless feeling this time was even shorter than last time when she had fallen onto the dragon’s back. Stopped by something hard, Emilia immediately tried to control herself and rolled.

Quickly standing up, she looked all around her.

“——”

Fortunately, there was no sign of an imminent attack bearing down on her. That was natural. Since Volcanica was far, far above her, looking down at her with incredible vigilance.

“——GGHHH!”

Apparently, Volcanica really hated having that white scale touched, because it was writhing high up in the sky.

Seeing it crying out as if to crush the sky between its jaws, Emilia’s eyes widened.

“Puck seemed to like it…”

Scolding herself for assuming that that meant Volcanica would like it, too, Emilia checked her arms and legs.

After she’d been flung around so violently on Volcanica’s back, her blood flow had been a little off-kilter. At some points, it had felt like it slowed to a crawl, and her eyes almost blacked out as blood stopped reaching her head, but Emilia had just barely managed to hold on.

And confirming that, Emilia noticed something.

"Ah! This is…"

Looking around, she realized she had reached a point even higher than the first floor.

The six pillars that should have been around her were nowhere to be seen, proof that Emilia had reached somewhere higher—in other words, this was the true top floor.

That fall off Volcanica's back had brought her here.

The highest floor of the Pleiades Watchtower, a place no one had ever reached before…

"Hooray! It was worth it!"

With a humble reaction that didn't seem to match the scale of her achievement, Emilia put her hand on her chest and immediately ran to the center of the highest floor.

Volcanica was currently writhing up in the sky but would undoubtedly return soon. Before that happened, she needed to help Subaru and the others by passing the examination.

"Please be a problem I can understand…"

Volcanica forgetting about the examination had been a huge problem, but Emilia meant whether the first floor's examination would be one that she could personally solve or not.

Fearful of that, Emilia raced to the center of the highest floor. And reaching the base of a pillar that stretched from there up to the heavens, she gasped.

It was there. Something different from the six pillars down below. On the center pillar on this highest floor, there was a mysterious distinguishing feature.

It was…

"Someone's…handprints?"

A black monolith stood at the base of the central pillar on the Pleiades Watchtower's highest floor. And on it were unmistakable handprints.

Six handprints of varying shapes and sizes.

4

The burst of light that coincided with the moment the giant scorpion changed color was the largest yet.

The swells of white light tore in all directions, obliterating the multiple gabaou aiming at the newly crimson scorpion and splitting the sands as the aftershock spread.

It went without saying that Subaru and Beatrice didn't escape the devastation, either, but Meili was hit much harder. Leaning forward to direct the demon beasts, she had taken the crimson scorpion's counterattack particularly badly.

The silver lining was that she had managed to avoid a direct hit from the stinger that was the true origin of the flash. Her small body would have disappeared without a trace if the stinger had even grazed her.

The worst had been avoided, but she had taken the full brunt of the shock wave that emanated from the desert-shattering stinger. That alone was enough to cause terrible injury.

"Meili!!!"

Subaru and Beatrice rushed over to where she lay in the sands. When they lifted her, they saw for the first time the true extent of her wounds. Maybe because she had reflexively curled up, the shock wave had mostly struck her back. Her black cloak was long gone, and shredded skin was visible through the torn clothes. The serious gashes and burns made Subaru's vision go dark for a brief moment.

"This isn't the time to drift off! What am I here for, if not this?"

Subaru pulled himself together with a smack and began calling upon the power within him.

Cor Leonis had been active this the whole time, and now he used its ability to share the burden of his comrades, taking some of the damage Meili had received onto himself.

Of course, if he took everything and collapsed, there would be no point. He needed to strike a balance, making sure Meili could survive, without knocking himself out.

"It's fine. You got this. You can do this, Natsuki Subaru."

The incomplete Natsuki Subaru might have panicked, lost control, and showed his pathetic side, but after tracing the path he had walked, Subaru had reevaluated himself. His role was of course to do the things that only he could do.

"…Ngh!"

Suddenly, Subaru got a taste of the suffering Meili was feeling. He groaned with a pain, like his insides were burning.

If he was being honest, he was already exhausted just carrying Ram's burden. Taking on Meili's near-fatal wound on top of that was practically suicidal.

"Not good…!"

Even though he talked a big game, it was impossible for him to carry both of their burdens fully. In which case, he had to prioritize Meili, since her life depended on it. There was no choice but to take on less of Ram's burden.

With her insight, that would probably be enough for Ram to know that something had happened.

"She's going to give me an earful after this…"

"Hah! After all that talk, look at you now. That's Barusu for you."

Imagining an uncannily realistic reaction, Subaru swallowed that bitter thought, along with the taste of blood.

Cor Leonis's ability should be nothing more than shifting a burden, so him experiencing the actual taste of blood was proof that there was some sort of physical consequence occurring in his body.

The mind's influence on the body was powerful.

Subaru had heard of situations where people who believed hot steel had touched them actually manifested burns on their skin. As he drew damage from Meili's back and internal organs, Subaru's own body was reacting as if it had happened to him.

If he wasn't careful, this would lead to two fatalities from the exact same cause.

"This is…a little problematic…!"

Spitting out the blood pooling in his mouth, he raised Meili's body. He leaped back, dodging a gabaou's flaming lance, while Beatrice's purple missiles drove it away.

The gabaou attacking just now was the one that had been letting them ride it for the past few minutes.

A betrayal by a shrewd demon beast when the going got rough—that would have made for nice plot development, but the reality was that it had simply reverted to normal, now that Meili's blessing was no longer in effect.

Without her directions, demon beasts were enemies of all people. And there were countless of those demon beasts all around them in this sea of sand.

"Beako! Meili's hurt bad! You need to heal her!"

"That's quite obvious, I suppose! But I'm a little busy for that right this moment."

"Yeah, I know! It was my mistake pushing Meili too much. I'll cover the tab."

Or rather, he had already started making payments, but the interest was piling up fast, and Subaru's balances were getting strained even after cutting down on his financing for Ram.

"No, this is where I stand my ground. I can't call myself a man if I don't—"

"Fwaaah! I suppose!"

"Whoa?!"

Subaru held Meili's body with gritted teeth as the effects of his authority hit his entire body. Then Beatrice suddenly leaped onto his back. Suddenly having her on his back was a shock to Subaru. Of course, she was as light as cotton candy, so it didn't slow his flight, but…

"Stop trying to bear everything alone, Subaru. We're partners, and Meili is one of our comrades, too. You aren't the only one who promised to help."

Clutching Subaru's whole head, Beatrice pleaded with him softly.

Subaru fell silent, and with a gentle healing magic, Beatrice performed first aid on Meili's wounds. He could feel the warm light healing Meili.

That warmth was how much Beatrice cared for everyone.

"*—Giiiiiii.*"

Behind them, the falling-out with the demon beast allies was rapidly developing.

Fortunately, even with Meili's blessing out of commission, it wasn't as if the crimson scorpion and the gabaou were suddenly ready to sign a neutrality agreement, and the same seemed true of the other demon beasts, too.

The crimson scorpion's sweeping pincers and tail took down around half the demon beasts chasing them.

Of course, the other half were still coming, so they couldn't just stop and enjoy the sights.

"Our options are…"

No, actually nothing, really.

Taking in Beatrice's words, the warmth she felt for Meili—even if that wasn't enough to get them out of this, there were ways to change the situation.

However, he had no idea whether he could pull it off without trying first, and the model for it was the worst one possible, so he was hesitant to try.

But…

"Subaru! If you're holding back for Betty's sake, then don't! And if it's another reason, then Betty will apologize together with you after all this!"

"———"

"I want to share the joy and the pain with you…so don't leave Betty behind! That's the condition of our pact!"

Seeing the look on Subaru's face, Beatrice angrily shouted at him.

He couldn't see her face because she was right behind his head. But looking adorable even as she was furious was one of Subaru's wonderful partner's characteristics.

Taking courage from her words, Subaru gave in.

There was no time to worry about it. And there was no need to worry, either, since his own partner had told him not to.

"I'll always love you, Beako."

"Betty loves you more."

With that exchange, Subaru looked down at Meili, who was on the verge of death in his arms.

And resolving himself not to let her slip away…

“—Cor Leonis, Second Gear.”

He shifted to a higher level inside himself.

That effectively spread the effect of the Little King authority. He had been scolded before for choosing the path of a lonely king bearing the weight of everyone’s thoughts, but he wouldn’t allow himself to become like the shameless, rapacious Greed, who shifted all of his own burdens onto others. What Subaru wanted from this authority was the ability to share burdens between friends who were willing to carry some of the load, who wanted to support one another.

In other words…

“Second Gear—the division of burden.”

…taking the burden of his comrades that Subaru should have been bearing alone and sharing it among those who wished to help shoulder the load.

And for the time being, that meant…

“—Subaru.”

“Yeah?”

“…This is really, really rough!!!” Beatrice cried.

“Yeah, it really, really is!!!”

The second stage of Cor Leonis allowed Subaru to share the burden he was carrying.

Not fifty-fifty. Just about a quarter. But even so, it was enough to make Subaru’s load feel quite a bit lighter. And it was enough to make Beatrice look positively ashen.

She yelled to cover how painful it was, and Subaru shouted back.

It hurt. It was painful. It was nigh unbearable.

Screw being a king who carries everyone’s burdens.

The Little King who couldn’t stand alone was able to stand with the support of those who cared for him.

“Incidentally, is there any chance I could ask you to share a little…?”

“——”

“Guess not. Too bad.”

While Beatrice, on his shoulders, was healing Meili, Subaru turned his attention to the crimson scorpion. It was Shaula, and he could still feel his connection with her through Cor Leonis. There was a big, faint light there.

But unfortunately, for whatever reason, he couldn’t split out some of the load he and Beatrice were carrying with it. Probably because she had no will of her own to accept anything from him now.

Only those who wished to support the Little King could be asked to do so.

It was a rigid but easy-to-grasp ability. That was how he could avoid becoming haughty.

Subaru would never allow himself to forget that he was being supported by others.

“Beako! Do something different with your head and body!”

“—Ngh, that’s a difficult ask!!!”

Asking her to continue healing Meili with her body, he needed her to think of a way out of this situation with him. Because the crimson scorpion’s glowing tail was being aimed right at them…

“—E M M!!!”

As they played their first trump card of perfectly conjured defense magic, the shock wave of the attack swallowed the three of them up.

5

On the top floor of the Pleiades Watchtower, Emilia said:

“—Someone’s handprints?”

Emilia murmured this as she stood in front of the central pillar.

Her purple eyes widened as she looked at the six handprints pressed into the surface of the monolith. They were all different sizes.

She didn’t know whose they were. But if they intentionally left their handprints together like that, then they must have been friends and connected with this tower somehow…

“? Wait, this is…”

As she thought that, Emilia felt something off about one of the handprints.

The one closest to the edge—and the one next to it that was a similar size. Those two were clearly smaller than the others. She guessed they were women’s hands.

And the one that caught her attention was…

“This is…my handprint…?”

Furrowing her brow, she looked down at her own right hand.

It didn’t make sense, but she couldn’t shake the feeling. One of the handprints on the monolith looked like hers.

“———”

Inhaling, Emilia faced the monolith. And to answer the question in her head, she reached out her right hand…

“—Thou who hath reached the tower’s peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor.”

“—Whah?! It’s back!”

Just before she could touch the monolith, a stern voice fell down on Emilia from above.

Looking up, she could see Volcanica’s wings were flapping as the dragon descended to the highest floor.

“———”

Turning away from the monolith, Emilia faced the Holy Dragon again.

It had been rough climbing up the pillar, but if things continued here, it would be difficult. The top floor was smaller than the first floor, and it would be hard to move around.

“And it would be *really* bad if the monolith was broken…”

The handprint felt familiar, but it also seemed likely to be related to the examination.

Emilia readied herself to protect it to the last. And looking down at her, Volcanica’s golden eyes narrowed. Its mouth opened to unleash a breath that would leave everything in cinders—

“…Why art thou here?”

“Eh?”

—However, what fell upon her wasn’t a fiery breath, but a question.

It was so unexpected that Emilia was taken by surprise. Because it wasn’t the same thing Volcanica had been repeating ever since she’d reached the first floor.

It was a question brought forth from the Holy Dragon’s own mind.

“Have you come to your senses? Then can you talk about other things? There’s a lot I want to talk about! Like the examination, or how to change the rules!”

Catching a glimpse of hope, Emilia immediately fired back.

“Hey, please! Let’s have a proper—”

“Hopping around so wildly. What would ye do shouldst thou fall? Were the worst to happen, it is I who would be scolded. Since none can match thee.”

“Volcanica…?”

Worried about everyone in the tower, Emilia pleaded desperately with Volcanica, who again said something other than its repeated message. However, it didn’t sound like a response to what she had said, either, and her bewilderment deepened.

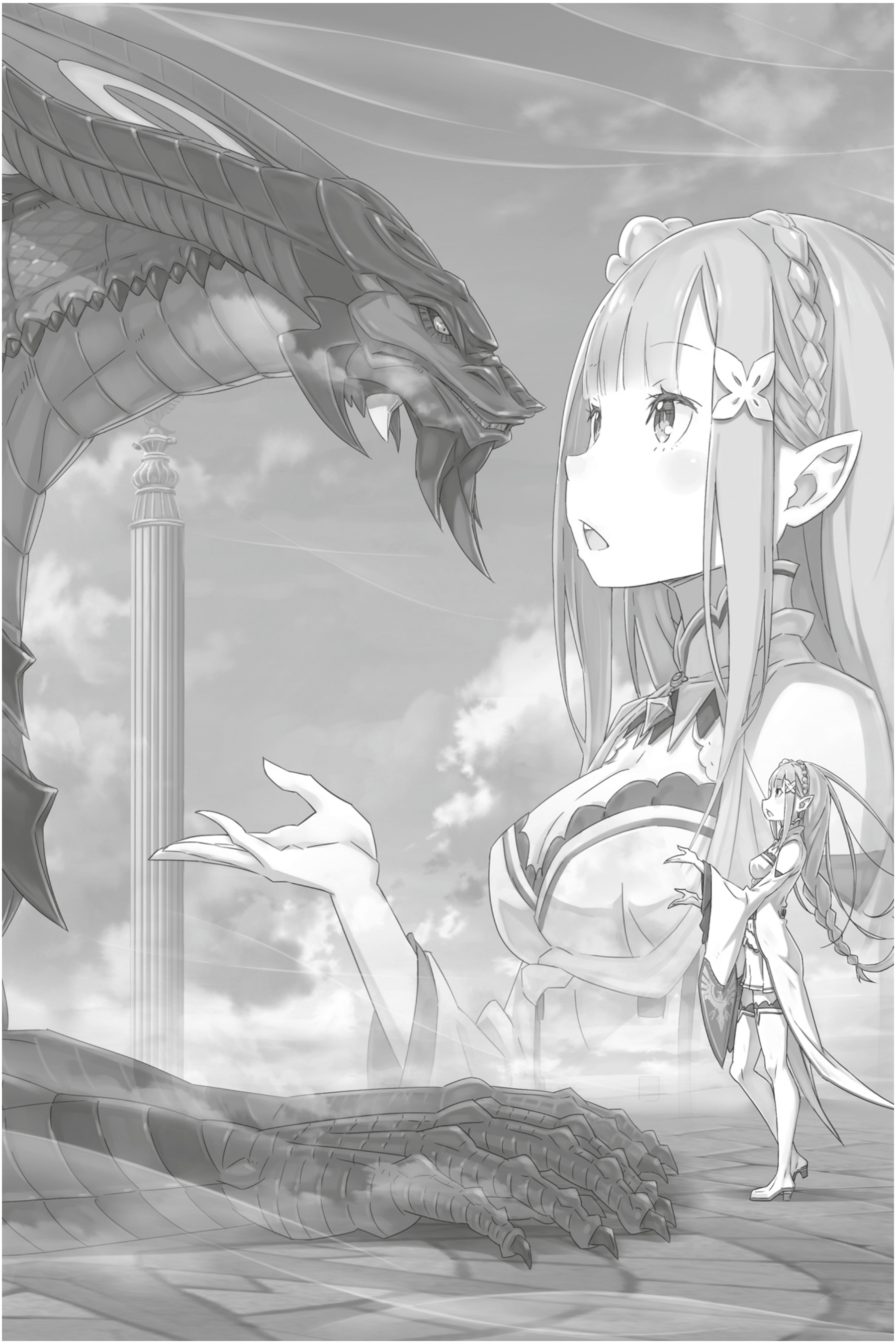
But there was a distinctly peaceful tinge to Volcanica’s golden eyes looking down at her.

That warmth was wholly unlike the vague distance earlier.

It was gentle and peaceful. Affectionate, even…

“Where did Flugel and Reid go? Shaula will be sad if they leave without saying anything. And Falseil will stir up a clamorous fuss.”

Volcanica continued, still looking gently down at Emilia.



The dragon had a gaze as if seeing something long past, saying the names Flugel, Reid, Shaula, and one other…

Emilia couldn't say for sure who it was without asking their family name, but it sounded familiar. If her memory wasn't playing tricks on her.

"Falseil, as in Falseil Lugunica? The king from four hundred years ago?"

That was a name she had encountered many times in her studies for the royal selection.

Falseil Lugunica—the thirty-fifth ruler of the Kingdom of Lugunica, who ruled the country four hundred years ago during the age of the Witch. The last Lion King who formed the covenant with Holy Dragon Volcanica and led Lugunica into its golden age.

"———"

Emilia glanced at the monolith behind her.

The six handprints. If they had anything to do with what Volcanica was saying, then would four of them be Flugel, Reid, Shaula, and Falseil? The other two were unclear, but one of them was presumably the one whose handprint matched Emilia's.

"Did I…forget something else besides my forest family?!"

That was the first suspect, since Emilia had sealed away her own memories once before. Had she maybe somehow wandered here and left her handprint, and then forgotten all about it?

"…No, that can't be it. If only Puck were here. He would know whether I'd been here before or not."

"—What dost trouble you?"

"Ah, ummm, I'm fine. Thank you for your concern, though. Thanks, but…"

In the end, it was questionable whether she could really talk with Volcanica, and so she was a bit troubled.

Thinking about what she should do…

"Please speak if thou art troubled. Allow us to remove thy anguish, Satella."

—She caught her breath at being called that.

"———"

It wasn't the first time she had been called that. A half-elf with silver hair and purple eyes. Many people in this world who saw Emilia associated her with the same person.

However, it was odd hearing Volcanica speak the name *Satella* with affection in its voice.

Because Volcanica, Reid, and Flugel, who pushed credit for all his achievements onto Shaula, were the very ones who had sealed away Satella, the Witch of Jealousy.

"Why are you speaking so kindly to the Witch of Jealousy?"

It was a question spoken in wonder.

It would have been a rough ask to demand Emilia realize it in that moment, but at the very least, looking objectively, that phrase was what set things off.

"…The Witch of Jealousy."

—That phrase caused a change in Volcanica's distant gaze.

There was a dramatic transformation in those golden eyes.

Raised in the woods, Emilia had experience in the wild. She had seen many animals and demon beasts who underwent a similar sort of change. And so she instinctively lowered her head.

—The next instant, the air right where her head had been exploded.

Space itself had been compressed, then after it swelled back up, everything exploded.

If she had been even a split second slower to duck, she would have died.

Whether it was the tail swipe earlier, this spatial distortion, or climbing the tower, Emilia had been through many brushes with death.

But this was perhaps the most dangerous one yet.

"But everything managing to work out means I might be *really* lucky right now…!"

Emilia interpreted the situation in a positive light as she slipped away from the dragon with a swift movement.

If she didn't stay positive, she might have collapsed because of all the changes going on around her.

Because…

"Satella."

Volcanica spread its wings again, facing her with unmistakable hostility.

Just when it had seemed like it had come to its senses, the Holy Dragon had changed back. Not just back. It looked even more ready to fight than before.

"Icicle Line."

That meant there was no need for Emilia to hold back. She unleashed her magic power with renewed determination.

The air cracked from the cold, and a white fog began to form. Even if this was the top floor high above the clouds, she still froze the world white around her.

With a crack, an ice weapon slowly formed out of the ground. Drawing that spear, Emilia spun it around and thrust it forward.

"But…"

Looking straight into her opponent's golden eyes, she wanted to believe that Volcanica's response was a misunderstanding and a case of mistaken identity, since Volcanica's eyes were filled with such grief-stricken sorrow.

"Satella. Right, Satella. We must stop thou who wert reduced to the Witch of Jealousy."

"…Were you friends?"

"Had we not hesitated that day. Had we not hesitated, no one…"

It didn't answer her question. But Volcanica's trembling voice sounded like an answer nonetheless.

The dragon inhaled deeply, preparing another breath that would scorch the world.

Emilia stepped in, to hit that white scale before it came. If she couldn't do that, there would be no saving her or anyone else.

"—Subaru, Beatrice, Ram, Rem, Meili, Patrasche, Echidna, Julius, Anastasia, Shaula."

She thought of everyone who was going through such a difficult time in the tower. Everyone she had to help, everyone who raised their heads with the same goal as she had.

Doing that, a swell of power that she didn't know welled up inside her breast.

"Witch of Jealousy, Satella!!!"

"No, you're wrong. I'm Emilia, the Freezing Witch of the Great Elior Forest."

Emilia poured the new strength all through her body and answered the Holy Dragon, who was apparently mistaking her for someone who looked similar.

The enemy was the Holy Dragon, but what of it? She had everyone with her.

So…

"—If nothing else, please remember that name!"

The final phase of the battle enveloping the Pleiades Watchtower began with an explosion of light above and below the clouds.

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A white flash lit up the clouds from above and below at about the same moment.

If there was anything capable of simultaneously observing those two battlefields separated by a thick layer of clouds, among many other things, it could only be an observer outside the world.

The battles that had developed in the efforts to clear the Pleiades Watchtower were finally reaching their climax.

The situation was…

"Whoooooooa!!!"

Subaru shouted as the sandy ground where it landed exploded, sending a cloud of dust into the air and a shock wave rampaging through the surroundings.

The destructive force assaulting them was enough to obliterate Subaru's body in an instant. The only reason it had not happened was…

"E M M!!!"

…one of the three original magics that Subaru and Beatrice had developed together.

In a vague sense, it stopped the flow of time for Subaru's and Beatrice's bodies, preventing them from being influenced by anything external to themselves. A sort of perfect defense magic.

"—Agh…"

In Subaru's arms, Meili groaned weakly, her eyes still closed.

It was a pained expression, but painful as it was, it was also proof of life. The damage flowing into Subaru from her seemed to be gradually easing as Beatrice's healing magic took effect. It was probably still within the margin of error, but it should be a turn for the better. Probably.

"It's difficult using healing magic and E M M at the same time, I suppose! If it weren't for Betty, the three of us would have long since kicked the bucket! I demand hugs as a reward after this!"

"I'll give you thousands of 'em! Just…"

Grateful for Beatrice, Subaru probed inside himself.

In terms of damage, there was nothing to do but grit his teeth and bear it. The problem was his mana reserves…despite not being any use except as an MP canister, Subaru's tank could only hold the same amount as an average person—a little bit below average, even.

The multiple uses of E M M were draining those reserves, like water pouring out of a hole in a bucket. At this rate, they would have to stop either the healing or the E M M.

"But not healing Meili isn't an option…!"

"Then it's up to you to decide when we stop using E M M and how to handle what comes next!"

"Aye-aye, leave it to me. I'm counting on you to heal Meili while being a handy spirit ready to do whatever I ask the moment I say it!"

"That's! A bad way! To put it!"

Exchanging glances, they severed E M M without any discord and leaped away to escape.

Behind them, the crimson scorpion and the swarm of demon beasts fought among each other while all chasing after Subaru.

Still not allowed to get too far from the tower, the most dangerous thing was that the crimson scorpion was aggressively targeting Subaru.

"—ghh! E M T!"

The light around its tail and in its compound eyes increased, and he could already sense a future where a white flash annihilated his head. Shouting as he visualized that imminent death, they activated their second original magic.

E M T solved E M M's weakness of not being able to move. It was a counter spell that erased any type of magic head-on—in theory, there was nothing lathered with mana that E M T couldn't negate. However…

"We had to use another trump card five seconds after canceling E M M!"

It was rather obvious to anyone who was paying attention that they were cornered, at a dead end, and in a pinch.

The third and final original magic crossed his mind, but it was incomplete.

If they messed up, all three of them might end up in an imaginary realm…

"I don't believe in myself enough to go all in on the big stage…!"

Even if he could acknowledge that this Natsuki Subaru guy was kind of impressive, he couldn't just accept that he was some superman who could get out of any situation.

All he had was being bad at giving up. He just stood back up after getting beaten down more often than most people. But that meant he had been beaten down more than most people.

"This isn't the time to get cold feet. It's a risky gamble, but…"

"—You'll make it work with stubbornness and vanity? That does sound just like you."

Just when Subaru was about to decide, there was no choice but to try.

A voice suddenly rang out from overhead, and a figure appeared between them and the onrushing death. It was so dazzling that Subaru had to squint.

It was dazzling in every sense of the word. The newcomer was gleaming with a rainbow aura.

"—Al Clauzeria."

The next instant, a light erupted to blast away the furious flash charging down on them.

A destructive shock wave, blazing flames, and a thrust with all of his life imbued into it. Driven back by a dark light, swallowed up by a swelling wave, deflected by a swirling desert wind.

It was as if nature itself was being manipulated, and the source of it was the dignified figure who landed atop the sand and swung his long, slender knight's sword…

"I hurried as fast as my legs would carry me. Things were looking dangerous here."

Joining the fight in the desert, was, of course, Julius Juukulius.

In response to that grand appearance:

"Julius…" Subaru's voice quivered. "You… My message was for you to help in the other dangerous places once you finished up!"

"Indeed, I received your message. That's why I came. Apologies, but compared to the others, I judged this would be the most dangerous location."

"Who asked you?! And what's that scratch?! What about Reid?!"

"I suffered a complete and satisfying defeat. He fled with his victory."

"Lame! If you're gonna fight, then win! I'm only gonna say it once, but thanks. If you hadn't come, we were gonna die!"

Julius sported a new white scar under his right eye and gave a dignified chuckle at that mix of gratitude and complaints. It was a pretentious reaction, but apparently he had finished his battle with Reid and gotten something out of it. As proof…

"Made up with your quasi-spirits?"

"More precisely, my sprouts have bloomed and become full spirits. And made up is not correct, either. It isn't as though we had broken up."

As Julius smiled, there were six bright lights all around him, his quasi-spirits—no, spirits. Managing to sign back on with six spirits after letting them go, he had to be quite the lady-killer.

"It took everything I had to persuade Beako. You're just gobblin' spirits up."

"Unfortunately, I was the one who got gobbled."

"That isn't funny! And when did you learn to make jokes like that?!"

Subaru's eyes widened at seeing Julius joke like that about what had happened to him.

From what he said, he had settled things with Reid. Reid's body was the body of Roy, so it was natural to assume Julius had also settled things with that Gluttony sibling, too.

And since Julius didn't mention any danger there, it was safe to assume he had managed to pacify Roy.

"Julius! You came at the perfect time! Let me borrow Qua!"

"—Understood."

Julius immediately assented to Beatrice's request. One look at Meili in Subaru's arms was enough for him to immediately realize this was a race against time.

The blue Qua, a water spirit, leaped out from the six and poured healing mana into Meili alongside Beatrice's gentle healing magic.

"It also seems there is a need to stall for time."

"Yeah, as you can see. Shaula's all red and pissed off now. Can you do it? You just lost to another red guy, right?"

"It would be an affront to a lady's honor to call her a rebound."

Julius raised his sword and faced Shaula head-on.

The crimson scorpion's compound eyes didn't react to the knight that had broken into the fight. Its malice was directed, as always, at Subaru, and everything else between him and it were simply obstacles.

That was its stance even when faced with Julius, who had raised himself to a new level as a Spirit Knight.

"Subaru, I shall take Ms. Shaula. As for the rest—"

"Manage things my own self somehow. Got it."

"No, work together with lady Beatrice to accomplish it."

"In moments like this, Beako makes up three-quarters of the calculation for my own strength."

Honestly, that was already a fairly bold statement on his part. Considering Subaru's role, it was probably closer to 90 or 95 percent.

But either way…

"Thanks for coming back…"

"I am pleased you have reassessed your own worth as well."

With that brief exchange, they both focused on fulfilling their own roles.

Julius advanced, so that the demon beast's attacks couldn't reach the three of them, decreasing the damage they could receive by putting himself into the line of fire.

Meanwhile, Subaru focused on getting Meili as far from danger from demon beasts as he could while buying time for their win condition.

Or so he thought.

"—!"

A shocking sensation made Subaru's head jerk up.

The reason was a sudden change inside the Pleiades Watchtower. It was…

"—Ram?"

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Volcanica's breath became a blue light that rained down on the highest floor.

"______"

For an instant, the thought of hiding behind the monolith crossed Emilia's mind.

It was sturdy and might not budge from a dragon's breath. But in the worst case, if something *did* happen to it, she had a feeling that would ruin the examination.

And unrelated to the issue of the examination, she had a feeling…

“If it got destroyed, that would be *really* sad…”

The monolith with an oddly familiar handprint.

She didn’t know how it was related to her. Maybe she was just overthinking things. But she wanted to confirm what that unidentifiable feeling was. So she couldn’t lose it. That meant…

She gathered all the reactive mana that she had channeled into her Icicle Line and concentrated it into a single point.

Emilia possessed a level of mana that surprised even her, but she couldn’t just control that massive amount of mana all at once. No matter how much mana she stored up, the limit for how much could be released at the same time was her gate. Emilia boasted an output more than ten times that of an average magic caster, but the strength of her long experience as a spirit mage increased her possibilities even further.

A mage interacted with the world using mana stored up inside themselves by manipulating their gate. A spirit mage borrowed the strength of spirits, using the mana in the air around them to interact with the world.

So there was a certain option available to Emilia, who had a firm grounding in both those traditions. There was a limit on how much water could come out of a faucet, but by storing it in a barrel, it was possible to use even more water. Emilia manifested that concept using her own body and the world around her.

Storing the mana overflowing from her outside herself, she could react with a massive amount of magic that ignored the limits of her gate…

“Absolute Zero.”

That was what Subaru had called it. It was a theory, an idea that they had decided would be difficult to actually perform.

Ironically, at the same time that Subaru was shouting about not being able to trust himself in a one-shot match on the highest stage, Emilia was testing her luck with something she had never once succeeded at, either.

—And she would have to *make it* succeed.

If Emilia’s natural magic power was at a level one, then the force of the magic that she was manifesting with her overflowing power now was at a level ten or maybe even a level one hundred.

In an instant, the sweeping white sky overlooking the world froze, not just as a metaphor but with a force that almost seemed to freeze the unstoppable passage of time.

Even the inescapable death that should have been the dragon’s breath was no exception.

The blue light and absolute zero crashed into each other, giving rise to an emptiness that filled the world.

"———"

In an instant, those two extreme powers negated each other, without even a struggle.

It was truly astounding, a negation without sound or impact, and what set the frozen time back in motion was Emilia leaping forward, ice spear in hand.

"Teeeeyaaaaaa!!!!"

Raising her voice, she charged at Volcanica.

So much strength had left her body, leaving her feeling terribly heavy. Even though the mana she had used had come from outside of her body, it was a massive effort for her to control it.

"But I can't just stop now!"

"—Satellaaaaa!!!"

Volcanica roared at its breath having been stopped and swung its front leg and tail.

An impact from beyond her perception, Emilia protected herself by relying on the feel of the ice crystals all around her—the seven ice soldiers she had created splintered even as they supported her charge.

Leaping to the side to evade the attack swinging down from above, stopping the following swipe with the ice soldiers' bodies, Emilia stepped on their shoulders and leaped high into the air. The tail swipe aimed at her in midair was slowed by two soldiers carried piggyback sacrificing themselves—and in that opening, she slipped in close to the dragon.

"That white scale…"

Emilia looked up to see if she could touch it, if she could land a blow. And her eyes widened.

It was shock. That white scale wasn't the Holy Dragon's weak point. It was a large white scar that looked like a scale.

"An old wound…"

The wound had long since closed, and there was no reason it should hurt if it was touched.

But the Holy Dragon had reacted so strongly to a simple touch, had writhed that much. Realizing it was connected to the old memories that Volcanica couldn't forget, Emilia gasped.

And in that moment's hesitation, Volcanica flapped its wings.

"Ah!"

Its massive body ascended in an instant, leaving Emilia's outstretched hand behind.

"No!!!"

As she put her hand on the ground, ice swelled beneath her feet.

The on-the-spot ice footing reached into the sky, and Emilia desperately stretched out her hand toward the flying Holy Dragon. As fast as she rose, though, she couldn't reach.

"—Everyone! Please!!!"

Responding to her shout, the ice soldiers rushed up the footholds she had made.

Running up, first one leaped from the top, then another leaped off the first, and on this went until Emilia leaped off the back of the last one.

"Sorry!"

The ice soldiers' backs crumpled as she firmly planted a foot on them. But all seven of them smiled and gave a thumbs-up as they fell. With their support, Emilia reached her hand toward Volcanica's tail…

"—Foolish."

The tail was withdrawn, leaving Emilia's fingers grasping air.

And as her eyes widened, the withdrawn tail returned at high speed.

There was no escape in the middle of the air. Even if she tried to make a shield of ice, the force of the impact even through that would still be enough to kill her immediately.

"—Ah."

Thoughts of failure and concern about what to do all swirled in Emilia's mind.

Feeling time seem to slow around her, she desperately searched for a way out, using every bit of her mind and body to discover something. Giving up was the only thing she couldn't do.

Because all of the people she cared so much for, none of them had ever chosen to give up.

So…

"I won't give up, either!"

But there was no salvation in just finding new resolve. And as if intending to point out her inadequacy, the ancient Holy Dragon's tail hurtled toward Emilia…

"—Lady Emilia!!!"

In that moment, a powerful wind blew up straight from below, giving Emilia just a little bit of a boost in her ascent.

The Holy Dragon's tail was aimed at her head.

Because she had accelerated, the tail's target was shifted from her head to her torso. Understanding that at an instinctive level, Emilia raised her knees. She made herself as small as possible to evade the attack. That allowed the tail to brush past, just barely grazing her toes, though the incredible force did send her spinning at high speed.

Emilia's body flew upward, still holding her knees. Overwhelmed by a feeling that threatened to make her insides spill out, Emilia clenched her teeth and created an ice platform in the sky, forcibly stopping herself.

There was a loud thud, and Emilia looked down with watery eyes. She felt that impact with her entire body.

She used the ceiling of ice in the sky as a foothold and as a vantage point to scan the upside-down world. Emilia saw Volcanica's head and also a figure that had emerged from the stairs onto the first floor far down below.

Or rather, not a figure. A person and a ground dragon.

"Ram and…!"

Ram's outstretched hand was what had summoned the gust of wind that had aided Emilia's ascent.

Even at this distance, she was obviously exhausted and battered. Emilia couldn't hide her amazement that she came running in her condition. But thanks to her help, Emilia had avoided dying from a tail to the head.

Emilia poured her strength into her legs once again. She would use the ice ceiling to charge at Volcanica again in one fell swoop. But in response, Volcanica behaved strangely.

Its tail still in the follow-through from its swing, Volcanica was looking not at Emilia but down below.

The ancient Holy Dragon was looking at Ram…no, not at her, but…

"—Patrasche?"

"Hiiyaaaaaaah!!!"

Emilia screamed, firing off through the sky.

A split second later, Volcanica looked up, smashing the ceiling of ice overhead. But it was too late. Emilia was no longer there. Leaping with all her might, she was closing in on the dragon's throat.

"Cheyaaaaaaa!!!"

With a beautiful kick, like a shooting star, Emilia dodged the swipe and approached Volcanica's white scar. She got closer and closer—until she finally reached it.

"———GGHHHHH!!!"

Volcanica let out another cry as Emilia's white shoe landed on its throat.

Emilia shouted and covered her ears as a sky-splitting sound resounded, falling in the rebound from the kick. Falling and falling and…

"Kyah! …Whah, thank you!"

As she fell, the ice soldiers that had served as her footholds caught her.

Saved by a soft landing, Emilia stood up. And then she confirmed she had landed on the highest floor, while Volcanica was still writhing in the sky above.

She ran to the monolith at the center of the pillar and searched for a familiar handprint…

"It is!!!"

Reaching out, she pressed her hand against the monolith this time before anything could stop her.

The monolith shuddered from the force of the impact, but Emilia's hand fit perfectly in the mystifying handprint. She didn't know how many people there were in the world with perfectly matching hands, but at the very least, the person who left this handprint in the monolith matched her.

And…

"—Thou who hath reached the tower's peak, petitioner of omnipotence who treads upon the first floor."

"Ah…"

The Holy Dragon descended when Emilia put her hand on the monolith.

Still flying in the sky, Volcanica, who had seemingly returned to its senses, at least a bit, repeated that same line.

But the words felt different from before, when it sounded like it had forgotten everything—it felt like Volcanica was actually asking a question this time.

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."

They were the same words she had heard so many times.

Ask the will of thou who hath reached the peak. In other words, it wanted to know the thoughts of the person who had made it to the top.

What was their wish, their hope, why had they come here?

"———"

Emilia had a lot of answers to that question.

What she wanted to do, what she hoped, what she came here for, there were a lot of things.

However, in this moment, in a huge rush, what Emilia wanted was —

"—I ask thy will!"

Hearing the repeated question, Emilia opened her eyes, and in a loud voice, she said:

"I want everyone to get along!!!"

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An instant later, a massive gale consumed the desert.

"Whoa?!"

"What is that?!"

Subaru shouted as he dodged furious demon beast attacks, and

Beatrice raised her voice in surprise, too, even as she continued healing Meili.

And, of course, Julius reacted the same while putting on a masterful, superhuman performance against Shaula.

No, his surprise might have been even greater.

Because even though he leaped back, sensing danger in the terrible sandstorm clouding his vision, there was no follow-up attack.

And discovering why, Julius continued to feel shock.

“This is…! Subaru!!!”

Hearing that shout, Subaru coughed up a mouthful of sand and turned in that direction. In doing that, he realized why Julius was so desperate and opened his eyes wide.

“Shaula?!”

“*Sssssss!*”

What Subaru saw was the crimson scorpion, toppled over in the sandstorm, its legs flailing in the air.

The tower’s keeper—its star guardian, according to her introduction—who had shown no reaction so far to any of the attacks it had faced, who had chased them with ruthless, robotic precision… had suddenly glitched out.

“Julius, did you do something?!”

“No, I did nothing of note. I was merely focused on withstanding the assault. When that sandstorm blew through…”

“Gale…right, that wind…”

The powerful wind that had swallowed them up moments earlier. When Julius called it a sandstorm, Subaru noticed something was off.

The merciless sandstorm that consumed those who ventured into the Auguria Dunes. Ever since they had broken through the problematic barrier and reached the area around the tower, there had not been a single gust of wind.

Certainly not anything that could be called a sandstorm. What blew just now was…

“Subaru! Look! In the sky!”

Beatrice’s adorable voice rang out as his mind raced with thoughts. Drawn by her voice, he looked up and saw it.

The change that had occurred. The incredibly obvious and dramatic change.

“The clouds cleared.”

The Pleiades Watchtower that reached through the clouds, up into the heavens.

The highest floor had not been visible from below because it was shrouded by clouds. The strange clouds that shrouded the watchtower had cleared.

And then he finally realized it. The wind just now had been to clear those clouds.

With the clouds gone, they could see the very top of the tower.

And in Subaru's optimistic analysis, that could only mean one thing.

"Emilia did it."

Murmuring to himself, he sensed the locations of his comrades in the tower through Cor Leonis—Emilia at the very summit, and Ram and Patrasche near her.

They had done it. Meaning if his guess was right…

"The tower's rules have been broken…Shaula! Hey, Shaula! Listen up!"

"*Sssssss!*"

"You don't have to fight us anymore! You can be free…"

He didn't know if the writhing crimson scorpion was suffering because the ancient covenant dwelling inside her had been severed, or any of the details.

But what he did know was that enough was enough. There was no need for her to suffer anymore…

"Right, Shau—"

"—! Subaru!!!"

As he called out and started to approach her, something grabbed his collar. The next moment, as he was dragged to the ground, a sharp tail furiously tore through the space he had just occupied.

Subaru was speechless as he felt the passing wind and smelled something distinctly burnt in the air.

If Julius had not pulled him back just now, that would have been a direct hit.

But what hurt the most wasn't the sensation of death, but…

"Hey, Shaula! Shaula! What was that?! Get ahold of yourself!!!"

"*Sssssss.*"

Hearing his frantic plea, the crimson scorpion slowly adjusted itself, regaining its footing. Its compound eyes shook as it stood back up, but it slowly locked on to Subaru while spittle dripped from its ferocious fangs.

That didn't look like the behavior of a rational creature…

"Subaru, I'm sorry to say…"

Julius grabbed Subaru's shoulder and started to step forward. However, knowing what he was thinking, Subaru grabbed him by the arm and stopped him.

He understood Julius was trying to bear the unpleasant role himself. But he wasn't going to let that happen.

"I decided to save her—I'm going to save her."

"Out of duty to a pupil you cannot recall?"

"No." Subaru shook his head. That wasn't it. He didn't want to help her because he was her master or anything. “It’s not because I’m her master. I’m doing it because I was moved by her.”

“———”

“She’s like Beako. All alone in this tower in the sands, crying in joy from the couple days we spent here together. How can I abandon someone like that?”

Gritting his teeth, Subaru maintained his grip on Julius’s arm.

Looking back at him, Julius exhaled.

“…You are as stubborn as ever. But that is how it should be.”

“Julius?”

“No, I was just astonished yet again. Once you start putting on airs, they must be maintained till the very end.”

Julius smiled slightly as he touched the scar on his left cheek.

Subaru’s eyes narrowed, and he noticed something soft in his open left hand. Looking, he saw Beatrice there. She was looking at Subaru with those big, round eyes that were more adorable than anything.

“Meili is through the worst of it. All that is left is…”

“Can you help me bring her out?”

“Betty would be a terrible friend if she said ‘no’ now… You really are a helpless partner, Subaru.”

Subaru scratched his cheek with an awkward smile.

And then, holding hands with the great spirit he was contracted with, he faced the crimson scorpion—Shaula.

Two spirit knights stood shoulder to shoulder, across from a crying girl who needed to be saved.

And…

“My body and spirit are exhausted…so hurry up and let us save you, Shaula!”

The final battle of the Pleiades Watchtower was going into overtime.

CHAPTER 9

SHAULA

1

Crumbling away.

Peeling away.

Fading.

Everything gleaming in the distance.

—Outside the tower, the stampede of demon beasts had been cleared by the hardworking demon beast tamer.

—On the second floor, Reid Astrea, who had taken over the body of Roy Alphard, had been obliterated.

—On the fourth floor, the defiler of fate, the loathsome Archbishop, Lye Batenkaitos, had been obliterated.

—On the first floor, the unknown and unseen examination had been cleared by Emilia's brave efforts.

They had cleared all the difficult challenges that had been set before them by the Pleiades Watchtower. This had only been possible because their comrades became one, trusting in each other, and combining their strengths. As Emilia might have put it, this was the result of *"everyone getting along."*

Thanks to that, they had finally reached this point. All that remained was…

"It's a lie if we don't all win together!"

"Let us begin!"

The two spirit knights lined up together. The one to take the lead was, of course, Julius.

Recovering Qua, who had been left aside for healing, he again borrowed the strength of the six spirits to clad himself in an aurora.

Subaru could sense it from Cor Leonis's effect, but the enormous swell of Odo being consumed to make that light should have been weighing heavily on Julius himself and his spirits.

He was really showing off. But Subaru never had any intention of drawing this fight out.

"Keep it short and sweet."

With a rainbow trailing behind him, Julius raced across the sands.

Closing the distance in an instant, Julius's slash approached the crimson scorpion. Perceiving him with its ferocious compound eyes, it batted the attack aside with its wildly flailing pincers and stinger.

"*Sssssss*!!!"

Those pincers had gotten incredibly hot, and the enormous firepower warped the atmosphere around the scorpion.

Scorching pincers—if Subaru were naming it, he would call it "Jesus's Scissors Hellfire Form."

Subaru could only tip his hat to anyone who got fired up enough to reveal a new technique during the final battle. However, as someone who had to fight against it, he would have preferred to not deal with that sort of incredible growth.

An enemy who overcame their limits and grew stronger was not what he was looking for in this situation.

"Minya!!!"

As the bright red pincer swung toward Julius, a purple missile interrupted.

Subaru was far too weak on his own to even think about inserting himself into Julius and the crimson scorpion's high-level fight. Beatrice supported Julius with shots of opportunity from the side, while Subaru waited for his moment.

"Subaru!!!"

"Ah."

He had been cutting through the sand to take up a more ideal position when he heard that cry. Looking up to see what it was, he spotted the crimson scorpion that had just evaded Julius's thrust—and had landed right next to him.

Subaru immediately stopped at Beatrice's shout. But the demon beast swung its tail as if brushing aside an insect, and Subaru could see imminent death.

"Hold on…!" *"Murak!"*

Subaru's and Beatrice's reactions overlapped.

Due to her magic, Subaru and Beatrice became as light as cotton candy. At the same time, Subaru's whip cracked, wrapping around the base of the scorpion's tail. In an instant, the two of them were yanked away.

"Whoa!" "Bwah?!"

They were not spun around. They were slammed down.

Just as it felt like they were floating, in the next moment Subaru and Beatrice crashed into the sand.

Even for someone as light as cotton candy, that was enough force to obliterate them if they had been hurled against a hard surface. Fortunately, what they hit was sand, so it simply knocked the wind out of them.

"I must ask you to refrain from a follow-up!"

"—*Sssssss.*"

The crimson scorpion took aim at them while they were buried in the sand; however, a rainbow light interrupted its path, and another exchange of scorching heat and blinding light began.

Light flashed, and each time it did, the desert split, and a sandstorm formed from the shock wave.

In terms of destructive power, they were even. Julius had the advantage in speed. And the crimson scorpion had the advantage in endurance—without a decisive blow, they were going to be pushed until they ran out of time.

"Bleh, bleh! Damn it! We have to do something!"

"Bleh, bleh! We have to find some route to victory!"

Pulling themselves out of the sand with teary eyes, Subaru and Beatrice spit out sand in the same way.

Julius with his rainbow, Subaru and Beatrice in their words—they were all searching for a way to reach Shaula.

"Think! Think! Think!"

Subaru's thoughts raced as he searched for a definitive solution, something that was more than just optimism or a pipe dream.

And as he went through the cards he had at his disposal, he had a realization.

There was one left. One final trump card to play.

"Beako!"

"Did you think of something?!"

Beatrice answered as if she had been waiting for him.

"Yeah!"

Thinking how lucky he was to be blessed with a partner who understood him, Subaru grabbed her small hand again and nodded.

And—

"—We're using everything from this trip now!"

2

Crumbling away.

Peeling away.

Fading.

Everything gleaming in the distance.

On instinct, she batted aside the furious rainbow of light shining in her eyes with both arms.

Both red-hot pincers contained enough power to burn through anything, be it boulders or steel, like a hot knife through butter.

"Not that I know what butter is."

Talking about things she had heard, she continued to corner her glimmering target.

However, they were on top of a wide-open field of sand with no obstacles around, so she couldn't quite finish the job. She dominated in areas with no cover when fighting at extreme distances…

"Snipers are always alone."

That was another thing she had heard. Snipers were people who attacked from far, far away, waiting patiently until they could finish off their prey.

And so she waited. She continued waiting with pride in her heart. Because she was a sniper. Watching in the distance, day in and day out, waiting for anyone who came to the tower.

There were rules. Rules that bound her to the tower. They were annoying, but as forgetful as she was, she also had a feeling she would forget a lot of things without them. That they had walked together, talked together, the days they spent together, and the memories they had shared together.

"Ahh…I don't want to forget that."

She had been left behind by everything.

Told to wait, she would wait however long it took. But she waited because she wanted him to come back. If he would just come back, she would wait however long it took.

So…

"I was so glad when you came back, Master."

Because everyone left.

She had started feeling unsure if she should still believe that he would come back. She didn't know whether she was waiting because she believed, or if it was just force of habit. She didn't think about it, either. Because there was nothing to think about. He had kept his promise before she rotted away.

"I'm so happy, Master."

That was why she didn't want him to go. He could just stay there forever.

She wasn't alone anymore, so she could graduate from being a sniper. And she deserved a suitable reward for that graduation, as far as she was concerned.

"I don't want to be left behind again, Master… I want to be loved, too."

Because everyone and everything had left her behind.

This time, she wanted to be with him, wherever, whenever.

So…

“Please love me, Master…”

3

The crimson scorpion shuddered, and the light from its carapace grew even more intense. It could have been simply shifting to an even more aggressive color, but it looked different to Subaru.

That bright, vivid red looked like an expression of Shaula’s cries. Four hundred years she spent with her emotions bottled up, holed up in this tower, doing what she had been told, and now her very being was glowing as all those overflowing emotions surged outward.

Red was the color of passion; red was the color of rage; and red was the color of irrepressible love.

The crimson scorpion glowed red because it wanted to love and to be loved.

“Horoscopes do say Scorpios are supposed to be super passionate!!!”

Shouting as he kicked off the sand, Subaru swung his shoulder and let his whip fly.

“——”

His aim was the fickle crimson scorpion turning its back on him and dueling with Julius.

He’d make his presence known with the whip.

Sorry to bother you when you’re busy, but the master you’re so passionate about is right here. The attention was so annoying, and I was cruel about it before, but…

“As a man, it does kinda bother me, seeing you so preoccupied with another guy…!”

“You, of all people, shouldn’t be complaining about that!”

Beatrice’s vicious objection rang out as his whip cleanly wound around the base of the crimson scorpion’s tail. His aim was true.

However, it was no different from moments ago when they had been swung down into the sand.

And the crimson scorpion, perhaps because of that underwhelming tug-of-war, stayed focused on Julius, leaving Subaru and Beatrice to be dealt with later.

They were weak. Subaru was more than happy to take advantage of that preconception.

“El Vita!!!”

“Guoooooh!!!”

Beatrice cast a spell, and as it took effect on Subaru’s body, his feet sank into the sand under tremendous weight.

As the opposite of Murak, instead of decreasing an object’s mass, Vita increased it—bumping up his weight class from a sumo wrestler’s *makushita* tier to a *yokozuna* tier. With that new mass, he fought the scorpion's tail.

However, that still wasn't enough. Even with more weight, it was still just the difference of one or two hundred odd pounds. That was no match for the absurd strength Shaula demonstrated when she carried the dragon carriage so easily over her head.

Holding on tight, his feet sinking into the ground, Subaru shouted.

"Here's the climax! Go for it!!!"

The next instant, Subaru's body, which was on the verge of being uprooted, suddenly steadied.

The reason was clear: The forces pulling at the whip were evenly matched. The crimson scorpion versus Subaru—or rather, Subaru and everyone else.

"——*Giiiiii.*"

Leaping in front of Subaru, a grotesque, dark figure grabbed the taut whip and burst into the tug-of-war: a gabaou.

And the gabaou wasn't the only creature joining the fray. A bear with flowers all over its body, a mole with wings, a twin-headed snake all joined, too.

The demon beasts that should have been his mortal enemies were aiding Subaru.

And the cause was, of course…

"…You really are a cruel taskmaster…"

Subaru heard a girl's annoyed, languid voice. The source stood atop the sands with a pale face and ragged breathing—Meili.

Her sweet face was tensed, and she let out a deep, long sigh.

Clapping her hands loudly, she said:

"Come on now, everyone in. No point watching from the sidelines."

A beat later, the desert trembled.

It was the footsteps of the charging demon beasts, their cries, and the power of the demon beast tamer—no, the mother of the demon beasts, who ruled over this demonic realm known as the Auguria Dunes.

In this battle, she used the stampede to turn it into a total war, demonstrating the true extent of her abilities.

"——"

Meili grimaced in pain, but she was still standing.

There was a trick to how she had recovered enough to be able to make it in time for this final battle.

Subaru had taken on the damage she had received using Cor Leonis, of course, and he had parted it out. That was where the last card he had came into play.

It wasn't Emilia, Beatrice, or Ram. It wasn't Julius, Echidna, Patrasche, Meili, or the sleeping Rem, either.

The final ally who was supporting them in their attempt to clear the Auguria Dunes…

"—Sorry for getting you caught up in this, Joseph! Please help us!!!"

In the distance, in the tower's basement—the ground dragon left behind on the sixth floor—Joseph. Noticing his presence with Cor Leonis, Subaru had boldly shifted the burden to the ground dragon.

It was a decision that pained him terribly, but what broke his heart most of all was that Joseph fulfilled the conditions for Cor Leonis. That meant Joseph wanted to support him just as much as Beatrice and his other comrades.

With Joseph's saintlike agreement, Subaru shifted the bulk of Meili's burden over to the ground dragon. That was what allowed Meili to stand back up.

That was also the reason why the crimson scorpion was suddenly deeply disadvantaged in this contest of strength.

And…

"…That's why you're going to lose, Shaula."

With the full force of their crew, even borrowing the strength of demon beasts and a ground dragon, they managed to pull the crimson scorpion off the ground.

The Finest of Knights wouldn't let that opportunity slip through his fingers.

The rainbow slash severed the crimson scorpion's tail at the base.

"———"

The severed tail exploded in a blast radius just like when it severed its body parts before, but the rainbow flash didn't allow it. Interrupted, having its trump card sealed, the crimson scorpion swung its pincers down furiously at Julius's back.

"Shhhh!"

But the arcing slash cleanly severed the pincer at its weakest joint. The scorpion shuddered from the force of its arm being severed but still reached out with its remaining right pincer to grab at Julius, but…

"Al Clanvel."

Just before it could close, the aurora around Julius's body unraveled and then swelled.

When the rainbow armor came undone, there was an explosive swell of light that burst the closing pincer from the inside, blowing it away at its base.

"———*Sssssss*"

Battered by the shock wave, the crimson scorpion's massive body rose in the air. And then, slamming down heavily onto the ground on its back, it was in a terrible state without pincers or a tail. The demon beasts quickly surrounded the overturned scorpion.

With all eight legs held in place, it couldn't move at all. Twisting its body, trying to avoid the impending end, it moved its head to better position its sharp fangs.

Or perhaps, with its extreme adaptability, it wouldn't have been so surprising if it gave birth to some new ability, managing some new growth to overcome this pinch, but…

"—That's enough, Shaula."

Subaru stood in front of the writhing crimson scorpion, reflected in all of its compound eyes.

It would have been easy to finish off the scorpion after it had lost all its weapons, had its legs pinned down, and been forced into this pitiful state. But that wasn't what Subaru wanted.

He didn't know for certain what the right choice was, but…

"Meili."

"…What would you have done without me, I wonder…?"

Meili sighed and moved over toward the crimson scorpion.

Standing beside Subaru, she exhaled and snapped her fingers. Focusing the scorpion's attention on her, she asked:

"Who are you? A scary red scorpion? Or…?"

"——"

"Or someone else?"

The movement of the crimson scorpion's compound eyes dulled. Quivering, they quietly looked at Meili, and then back to Subaru.

Those aggressive red eyes slowly began to change color.

"Shaula."

The carapace's red glow faded.

The eyes turned green, the carapace black, gradually calming, until finally…

"Shaula!"

Finally…

4

Crumbling away.

Peeling away.

Fading.

Everything gleaming in the distance.

Everything gleamed so much in the distance.

Everything crumbled, peeled, faded, gleaming far, far in the distance.

Left behind, memories fading, but it was definitely shining.

Because those days were so precious, she was desperately gathering them up.

Sitting on the ground, holding her knees, Shaula cocked her head a bit.

"Do you remember, Master? You told me to wait and that you would come back for sure, and then you disappeared."

It sounded like she was talking about old memories, but Subaru shook his head.

"I don't remember. In fact, I'm telling you I don't know what you're talking about. Quit making me keep repeating myself."

"That's how it goes, I guess. Since I get my forgetfulness from you. We're two peas in a pod."

"Ugh! I mean, I'll admit in a strict sense, it might be true enough, but still…"

He said that, but he really did feel a bit of affinity for her, since she used terms from his original world so fluently.

He wasn't as charming, as cute, or as courageous as she was. He could never exert himself so hard for the sake of someone who had left him behind for four hundred years.

"I'm way too impatient. Hasty, too. I want results fast. Maybe I'd feel like trying to endure it if they were with me for it, but…"

"That's no good, Master. Don't you know the saying *there's no sacrifice too great for the sake of love*?!"

"Isn't that supposed to be go *there's no sacrifice too great for the sake of fashion*?! What you said sounds like the slogan of a crazy, devoted woman. Like, unhealthily devoted!"

"It's all for the sake of realizing the feelings swirling in my heart. I don't mind if you laugh and call me stupid or pathetic. Even that laughter is wonderful…"

"I'm not laughing. Look, I'm even a little teary." Subaru pointed to his face.

"Oh, where?"

Shaula leaped to her feet, leaning in to see, and as she got close enough that he could feel her breath on his skin, Subaru suddenly noticed the structure of her shapely face.

Big, almond eyes that held a purposeful drive, and a straight nose. Long eyelashes, perfectly smooth skin that belied how long she had spent in the desert, and though it was hard to notice with how expressive her face was, an overall build that was more gorgeous than adorable.

Given the name of a star, she was a home to return to, a being whose fate was waiting for her beloved.

"Huh? That's not just teary. Are you actually crying, Master?"

"…Your master is a son of a bitch. I'd like to punch him myself."

"Seeing that would give me some very conflicted feelings! If you KO'd yourself, what would happen?! …Argh…"

Subaru closed his eyes as his lips quivered.

Something hot welled up, pushing past his eyelid and trickling down his cheek.

Seeing that clear drop, Shaula murmured again, and…

"———"

And unexpectedly, Subaru felt something damp rub against his cheek.

Opening his eyes, he saw Shaula slowly moving away from his face. Smiling mischievously, she put her finger to her lips and stuck out her red tongue.

"…Your body fluids are salty and sweet."

"Phrasing…"

"It doesn't matter how I say it. My feelings are exactly what it says on the box. I love you, Master, body and soul."

She had said it so many times.

Knowing exactly how far she was willing to go, he could never say that she was anything less than heartfelt. The reason she talked about love at every opportunity is because she was overflowing with it. Because the feelings she had always wanted to express overflowed from inside her. Having spent four hundred years wanting to love, wanting to be loved…

"I love you, Master."

"…I'm not gonna say 'I love you, too.'"

"I know that. You're mean and ultra-shy. But I like that about you, too. From the bottom of my heart. Only youuuu."

"———"

Left behind by time, bound by the role she had been given. And when that role pushed her to hurt the person she loved, she had wept and begged for death.

Even though Subaru had said he wasn't going to leave her like that.

"I'm not…going to say I love you…"

"…That's fine. I'll just keep saying it enough for the both of us. And eventually, there will come a day when it boomerangs back at me."

"Eventually…? Again, with that. You planning to wait four hundred years?"

"Yep. Four hundred years is just a drop in the ocean."

She had wept, saying in such a pained voice how long she had waited. Wept at being left to the passage of time, held hostage by her love, and so, so lonely for all that time.

But there was no way the current her could know of that world where she had revealed her feelings. So despite how nonchalant she seemed now, there was no telling what emotions swirled in her heart beneath the surface.

Subaru had vowed not to make her cry. And he had no intention of going back on his word.

So—he wanted her to cry. To cry and say it wasn't enough yet. If she cried and cried and cried until she collapsed in tears, Natsuki Subaru, even though he wasn't her master, would do everything in his power to stop her tears.

And yet…

"Four hundred years is just like the day after tomorrow."

There was no trace of her crimson scorpion form. Just a beautiful, smiling woman.

So beautiful, it almost swept him off his feet. So fragile, it seemed like she might crumble if he touched her. Shaula's pale cheeks reddened slightly, and like a maiden in love, she continued.

"Since…"

Like a maiden in love, she said:

"…Since I loved you the whole time I was waiting, too."

"———"

"Hey, Master. Someday…"

5

Crumbling away.

Peeling away.

Fading.

Everything gleaming in the distance.

Everything gleamed so much in the distance.

The words exchanged in that dreamlike white world came to an end.

Was it real, fake, or some daydream?

Either way…

"—Shaula."

A bit of carapace on the sand turned to dust.

And it didn't stop there. It spread to every piece. The severed tail, the severed pincer, the legs held down by demon beasts, and the head that Natsuki Subaru was cradling. They all…

Subaru tried to gather the bits of the fading being he held in his arms.

"…I suppose she completed her role," Beatrice said softly.

That adorable spirit watched sadly as the demon beast—no, the fellow artificial spirit like her—crumbled away after sacrificing herself so much to fulfill her role.

Subaru's mind refused to understand what Beatrice was saying. But he did understand it at an instinctual level. This wasn't death. This was the inescapable result of her role as the Pleiades Watchtower's star guardian. Today was a day that was bound to come at some point.

"Then…if we…"

If they hadn't come, would she still have been here? Would she have continued waiting here forever for someone who was never going to return…?

"…Subaru, you, of all people, should know that question is an insult to her."

"______"

"And regret is not what you should feel."

The knight spoke, having already sheathed his sword and readjusted his bloody and sand-covered clothes.

It was cold, but he was entirely correct.

Gritting his teeth, hiding how much he hated how right Julius was, Subaru sighed deeply.

And he hugged the woman who had been all alone for so long even harder.

The woman who had been left behind, who had lived so long without anyone around.

At her side, seeing her off.

Subaru, Beatrice, Julius, Meili were there as the woman who had been alone passed among friends.

"But I would've been just as happy even if it was only you, Master."

Tears welled in his eyes and spilled over as she made that charmless remark.

The demon beast's fangs gently traced the drops trickling slowly down his cheek. Those fangs that were sharp and looked like they could break anything, moved so gently, so as not to hurt Subaru, who was easier to hurt than anyone there. Endearingly, gently, kindly…

And…

"…Ah…"

The feeling from inside his arms disappeared.

The scorpion's carapace became undone, crumbling away, turning to dust. The black dust scattered across the sands.

Subaru raised his voice.

"Shaula…"

"Yes, Master?"

"Shaula…Shaula…Shaula…"

"You rang, Master?"

"Shaula, Shaula…"

"Mrgh, I don't know what to do with all this love!"

Closing his eyes, he heard her voice answering him.

And yet she was nowhere anymore.

"…Ah…"

Kneeling in the sand, Subaru tore at the ground.

Someone's voice reached his ears. He didn't know who, and he couldn't bring himself to check. But, drawn by it, he looked up, and his eyes widened.

The desert was covered in black dust. It trembled slightly, and something crawled out. It was a small creature that could fit in the palm of his hand. Scraping at the sand with its two pincers, it used its tail to deftly pull its body out of the sand. A little creature with a red carapace…

It moved toward Subaru kneeling on the ground and leaned against his sandy hand.

It was just a touch, but it felt like a vestige of her charm…

Crumbling away.

Peeling away.

Fading.

Everything gleaming in the distance.

Everything gleamed so much in the distance.

—And it's because you were there.

"Four hundred years is just like the day after tomorrow."

"…Since I loved you the whole time I was waiting, too."

"Hey, Master. Someday…"

"Someday, come visit me again."

"Next time, you wait for me. I want to be chased, for once."

"This is really, really important, Master. Promise me."

"Next time, don't forget me."

"I love you, Master."

6

"You idiot," Subaru whispered with a quivering voice. "Who could ever forget you?”

And lifting up the thing ticklishly touching the back of his hand, he held it in both hands.

Accepting those awkward, embarrassing feelings, the tiny little scorpion shuddered.

Its carapace was red, and its eyes were a vivid scarlet.

The color of a love that didn’t fade even after four hundred years.

CHAPTER 10

HERO

1

Natsuki Subaru was always making promises he couldn't keep.

"_______"

No one said anything to Subaru as he knelt quietly on the sand.

Not Beatrice behind him, nor Julius or Meili behind him. They couldn't find the words.

But as if consoling him in his silent tears, the scorpion crawled up his arm, onto his shoulder, and leaned against his neck.

Subaru didn't know what this tiny scorpion was.

Appearing from the mound of dust from the crimson scorpion's massive body, did it actually have some connection to Shaula? Or was it actually her…?

"…No…that's not it."

Shaula was gone. Though it saddened him, he was sure of that.

That carefree smile, that annoying touchiness, that affection that seemed so misplaced…it was all gone.

If Shaula had wept and pleaded not to disappear, Subaru would have searched with all his might for a way to stop it, giving as many lives as he had to save her.

But that wasn't what she wished for.

With a smile, she just asked that they meet again sometime and then disappeared.

He didn't know how, he didn't know if it was possible, but…

"I got it… Someday, somehow, I will meet you again. So…"

To answer the request of that woman who said she loved him with such a cheerful smile.

For that sake…

"—So farewell for now, Shaula."

The desert wind carried away the dust of her feelings and body.

As he watched on, Subaru breathed deeply. And glancing at his shoulder, he saw the scorpion, as if telling him to cheer up, reach out and pinch his ear.

"Owww!"

There was a sharp pain, and he could almost sense someone telling him not to lose heart. His eyes teared up at the pain as he nodded.

"I got it, I got it," he said as he grabbed the scorpion to pull it off his ear. "Owww! I said I got it; you can let me go already…owww!!! Hey, I'm bleeding…you little! Are you serious…?!"

"…What are you doing, mister."

The tiny red scorpion was still holding on tightly, and he couldn't pull it away. With a look of exasperation, Meili grabbed it.

"It might be tiny, but it's still a beastie. Get it too close to your face and it might eat your eye or nose—this isn't that half-naked lady, you know."

Saying that, she placed the scorpion on top of her head.

Unlike with Subaru, it didn't try anything with her. Under the influence of her blessing, its savageness receded. That proved the tiny red scorpion was a demon beast—proved that it didn't have Shaula's consciousness.

"Subaru, we need to heal your wounds."

As he was about to look down again, Beatrice grabbed his sleeve, obviously concerned about his condition.

Biting his lip, Subaru nodded deeply. They couldn't just stay out in the desert forever.

"—Subaru! Everyone!"

In the distance, the great door of the watchtower opened, and Emilia came running out.

From how battered her clothes looked, it was clear she had not had it easy. But that applied to all of them.

There was too much they needed to talk about and a farewell to finish.

2

"…Shaula was always doing her best."

Hearing the whole story and the reason for why Shaula wasn't there, Emilia looked down at the ground where even the dust had scattered out into the desert, and she grieved in her own way.

There was an anguished look on Emilia's face at seeing Subaru look so down after explaining what had happened to Shaula.

"Lady Emilia, what of the first floor? Were you able to safely clear the examination?"

However, Julius chose intentionally to move the conversation along.

"Yes." She nodded. "It was *really* difficult and hard to understand, but it seems like I managed to complete it… Also, you remember who I am now, too, Julius?" Emilia asked nervously.

"………Yes…I do. Indeed, I can remember it clearly."

Julius answered with a start.

Putting his hand to his mouth, Julius murmured, "Lady Emilia" again, pondering on it, nodding as he considered the person who should have disappeared from inside him.

"Do you remember me Beatrice? Meili?"

"…You don't have to worry. I remember, I suppose. Indeed, without you mentioning it, I wouldn't have remembered that I had forgotten."

"Me too. I remember, too. And do you remember what you promised me?"

"Of course. I'll never forget it. Thank goodness. Ram and Patrasche remembered me, so I thought it should be fine, but…"

Hearing their responses, too, Emilia touched her hand to her chest in relief.

Subaru stopped her there, though.

"Wait a second. If everyone remembers Emilia-tan now, then…"

"Ms. Ram slew Lye Batenkaitos."

Subaru's eyes widened at Julius's conclusion.

Lye Batenkaitos, one of the three Archbishops of Gluttony and a mortal enemy with whom Subaru and Ram had a deep connection.

However, if Emilia's name had returned, then…

"…Can you remember, Rem?"

The gaping wound in Subaru's heart, the girl who had been forgotten by everyone.

This journey was to take back what had been stolen—and for Subaru, it was primarily to rescue Rem.

Impatient, driven by that restless hope, Subaru looked around at everyone.

However…

"…Sorry, Subaru. I can't remember Rem yet."

"…Argh! Why?!"

"Betty, too. I can't remember Ram's sister. And…"

"And? And what? Did something happen?"

"I can't remember Julius, either. The damage done by Gluttony has not been completely undone yet, I suppose."

"Julius…" Emilia nodded just like Beatrice.

Meili shrugged, not having known Julius before his name was stolen, but there was no reason for Emilia or Beatrice to lie. So Rem's and Julius's names had not been restored…

"On that point, I can imagine why my name is not yet restored," Julius spoke up. And looking at everyone with his almond-shaped eyes, he continued. “The Archbishop Roy Alphard, the Gluttony who stole my name, is alive and bound. I suspect that is why my name has yet to return.”

3

Going through the main doors and back into the Pleiades Watchtower, the dragon carriage that had brought them to the tower was waiting on the fifth floor, and they were greeted by a familiar face.

“Emilia, and Natsuki, too. It’s been a tick.”

“…Is that…Anastasia?”

Subaru’s eyes widened at the person waving her hand and smiling with an elegant restraint.

He confirmed the gestures, behavior, and even expression were natural. This was a complete reproduction of the person that the artificial spirit Echidna couldn’t quite perfectly pull off. No, not a reproduction.

Since it was her natural character. Reproduction wasn’t the word…

“Anastasia! You woke up?”

“That’s right. Looks like I had a long nap there. Sorry for the worry. Echidna told me what’s been happening.”

“Echidna’s still okay, then?”

The response came from the white fox wrapped around Anastasia’s neck.

“Somehow,” she answered apologetically. “It doesn’t seem like I’ll be dying for the moment, aside from kicking myself.”

“Don’t be like that.” Anastasia rubbed Echidna’s head. “I told ya, I chose this myself, so you don’t need to go blaming yourself. You agree, right, Julius?”

“Me? …Indeed. Honestly, even though I was kept in suspense for quite some time by your decision, Lady Anastasia, I agree with your actions, though it is difficult to say so.”

“Why’s that?”

“As your knight, I felt myself blessed at hearing the reason you chose to hide within yourself,” Julius answered gracefully as he broke into a smile.

“Well, don’t get too excited.”

“Anastasia…you forgot Julius, didn’t you? You seem to be getting on pretty well in spite of everything.”

“I forgot whatever our original relationship was…and at least for me, I’m definitely madder than a wet hen, but…! But…!” Anastasia’s lips quivered, so Echidna chimed in to translate.

“She’s enduring it as best she can, as you can probably see.

Fortunately, I can tell her about the Julius I've gotten to know these past two months. Seems like maybe that was the reason I was born."

"…You've gone a little over the edge in your own odd way, from the sound of it," Beatrice replied, with ever-so-slightly gentle words.

There was a snort from the fox's snout.

"Yeah." Echidna nodded.

Echidna, the artificial spirit without a past, came to the watchtower in Anastasia's stead, and after a long, winding road had finally reached a satisfying conclusion for herself.

Part of that was thanks to Anastasia safely reinhabiting her own body.

"…Hey, Anastasia. I'm *really* glad you came back, and there's a lot I want to talk to you about, but…"

"I know. The Archbishop who Julius smacked upside the head, right?" Anastasia shrugged. "With a little this and that, Julius tossed him in the back of the carriage."

As Emilia pondered her words, Subaru gulped at seeing the carriage. Roy Alphard, Archbishop of Gluttony, was tied up inside there.

"——"

Before moving to the door of the carriage, he gave the harnessed ground dragon Joseph a pat on the neck. The Gilas ground dragon, with his four thick legs, had been the final protagonist in the battle with Shaula. They had not managed to achieve the best outcome, but that didn't make Joseph's thoughtfulness any less meaningful.

"You were a huge help… Gimme a hand in the future, too, in case anything happens."

Joseph snorted, as if to say that was a lot to ask.

As Subaru awkwardly smiled just a little, his face soon became serious before he stepped toward the carriage's passenger compartment. With a nod from everyone, he peered inside.

"This is…"

His nerves were tingling as he looked in, but what he saw made his eyes widen.

Roy was indeed inside. However, the way he was tied up was a bit different from how Subaru had imagined. Roy Alphard's whole body was covered in what looked like a black crystal, and he was still unconscious—or rather, sealed.

"It is an application of shadow magic, I suppose. Using Shamak to render him unconscious and freezing him like that… This is quite the nasty method."

"So then that black stuff is like a big wad of Shamak…?"

Startled, Subaru looked at the seal again after hearing Beatrice's explanation. It was safe to say that Shamak was the magic he had relied on the most before his pact with Beatrice. He was stunned by Julius's ability to use it as a seal.

"Do not misunderstand, please. This is not a method I created myself. It follows the same theory as the most well-known seal in this world. Though the difference in scale is incomparable."

"The most famous…you don't mean?"

"The Witch of Jealousy," Emilia said, looking at the locked-up Archbishop.

"Indeed." Julius nodded deeply.

Roy's seal was the same as the one used to seal the Witch of Jealousy in a land farther still to the east, keeping her in slumber these past four hundred years.

"…Why did you leave him alive, Julius? When the other one, when Lye Batenkaitos died, Emilia's name returned. So then…"

"There was no proof. That was the greatest reason I chose not to execute him."

"———"

"It is true that Ms. Ram has slain Batenkaitos. However, do we know if that is the sole reason Lady Emilia's name was returned? If it is not, then we might lose everything."

"—In that case, what about using the book of the dead?"

Julius's logic was sound, so Subaru suggested the back door that existed in this tower.

There was nothing better for knowing the thoughts of others. Since it allowed the reader to experience a person's entire life.

"Even if we interrogate him, there's no guarantee he'll tell it straight. So using the book of the dead to know his innermost mind is…"

"Subaru, that's…I don't think that's good…"

"But it should be guaranteed. With that—"

"Ummm, mind if I break in here?"

Anastasia raised her hand as Subaru started to argue with Emilia, who reacted negatively to the idea of the book of the dead. Glancing at Subaru, who was looking frustrated, she put her pale hands together in front of her chest.

"I just heard about it some from Echidna, so maybe there are gaps, but…those books of the dead or whatever? Isn't it kinda dangerous to be trusting them?"

"Dangerous how?"

"What do you mean? You experienced it yourself, didn't you? Did you lose yourself for a while there while I was out?"

"Ack…"

How much had Echidna told her in such a short time? She hit him in a sore spot.

To be precise, the books of the dead were not the true source of his memory loss. But it was true that reading them meant being heavily influenced by the person in the book.

There was the example of Reid, too. There was no guarantee Roy Alphard wouldn't be reborn if Subaru's ego was overwritten while reading his book of the dead.

"Then…then are you saying letting him live is right? After all he's done?!"

"If you're asking me right and wrong, then I don't really think letting an Archbishop live is right. But I have a theory about things."

"A theory…?"

"When it comes to lives, taking them should be a last resort—anyone who thinks it's easy to kill another person ain't gonna meet a happy end. And that's not Hoshin talking, that's me."

Subaru's eyes widened.

He recoiled at the idea that such naïveté existed in this brutal fantasy world of swords and magic. But at the same time, it felt right to him, too.

He also thought that the fewer people who had to die, the better.

That went for allies, of course, but even for enemies, it was better to end things with fewer deaths.

"But this guy… All the things he did… Does he deserve that sort of kindness…?"

"I'll kill when I don't have a choice. That's my resolve, and I'll get my hands dirty if I have to. But acting on impulse ain't right… And I think you'd agree with me there."

"That's…"

"That's why you can cry over someone." Anastasia traced a line on her cheek, pointing out the traces of tears on his face. "…I'd rather have a long and fruitful relationship with that Natsuki, 'stead of the merciless and cold-blooded one."

The ache of having lost Shaula made Subaru look down quietly. It wasn't fair when she put it that way. But it was undeniably effective.

"…Subaru, I agree with Anastasia. When I think about Julius and Rem, I want to resolve this as fast as possible, but…"

"At the very least, you need not trouble yourself over me. Having come this far, I believe caution should be prioritized over speed… My brother is on the line as well."

Joshua had been left behind in Pristella. His memories being recovered was crucial, too, and Julius's opinion was guarded but prudent.

A swift conclusion to make up for the pain of loss…that was what Subaru impulsively desired.

"To sum it up, Ana and Julius believe the Archbishop of Gluttony should be transported to the capital, where he should be interrogated for the method of saving those afflicted by his authority. After that, he will not escape a death sentence.”

“There are limits to taking age into account, too. I’m sure it will get to that in the end.”

Seeing the strength seep from Subaru’s clenched fist, Echidna and Anastasia wrapped it up nicely.

Emilia didn’t express any arguments with that treatment of Roy. Taking him to the capital sealed like that was in a sense the same as had been done with Sirius.

“Are y’all okay with that?”

“Yes. I want to be able to remember all the people who have been forgotten, too,” Emilia answered, raising her head.

Feeling encouraged but at the same time bitter that she didn’t disagree, Subaru looked away from the Archbishop in the carriage and then suddenly sank to his knee.

“Ah…”

His head grew heavy, and the world reeled.

“Subaru! Argh, you *did* push yourself too much! Carrying something that unpleasant this whole time, of course you’d end up like this!”

Beatrice yelled as she supported Subaru’s shoulder.

Her cute voice echoed angrily in his mind, and he realized he was a lot more exhausted than he had thought.

It was obvious, really.

Losing his memories, dying so many times, dying some more, coming to terms with himself to get his memories back, waking up to the five obstacles threatening them, fighting while carrying some of the burden of his comrades using the authority, and losing Shaula in the end…

“…Ah, I…”

“Subaru, it’s okay. Everything will be fine. Rest for now. Just a little is fine. Let’s talk more when you wake up. There’s a lot that I want to say, too.”

Slumping weakly, Emilia hugged Subaru from the front. The soft feeling and sweet scent ordinarily would have made him tense up, but to Subaru right now, they were a panacea. His consciousness faded into darkness.

If he somehow died in the depths of that darkness, would he come back to where everything was still rampaging, would he be able to search for a way to save Shaula?

Even though he half understood that there wasn’t a way, he couldn’t help wishing for it.

And slowly, his consciousness faded to black.

"Upsy-daisy."

Emilia lifted Subaru up after he passed out.

Sleeping like the dead, it was clear to her just how much he had worked himself to the bone to deal with all the problems happening in the tower.

Just how desperate he had been to save all of them.

Even though it must have been so difficult for him after losing his memories, Emilia had been so happy when she saw him run to her when Batenkaitos had stolen her name and she was forgotten by everyone.

She wanted to tell him properly.

So that Subaru, who worked so hard, wouldn't blame himself too much.

What happened to Shaula was all their faults, and also…

"—Her master Flugel is a terrible person."

The man who had foisted the title of "Sage" on Shaula and left her in the Pleiades Watchtower with her new role. Even if he was one of the three great heroes who saved the world, he was on Emilia's list of villains after making Shaula so lonely and making Subaru cry.

"From the look of it, his exhaustion is terrible, but…it is not dangerous. He will recover, so long as he rests. Shall we take him to the green room?"

"Yes, Ram and them are there, too… You looked after Rem when Ram came to help me, didn't you Anastasia?"

"It's nothing too special. After getting myself back, I just saw Julius off going to help Subaru and Ram and Patrasche going to help you, is all… Unfortunately, there wasn't any change in Rem."

"I see…" Emilia's brow furrowed.

Defeating Lye Batenkaitos was in a sense getting revenge for Rem. But what mattered most was her waking up. Compared to that, revenge was just a trivial bonus.

At the very least, that was what Ram would say without hesitation. Rem's revival was the most important thing.

"Let's hope we can get the answer to that out of Roy Alphard. Also, there are too many gaps to fill about this tower…no, the Great Pleiades Library."

"A grand library where you can learn anything…that was what Shaula said. She was a bit haphazard, but all the more reason she was unlikely to spin a tale, I suppose. And it is certainly true that this is a grand library."

They would have to find out whether that only meant the books of the dead or if there was something more to it.

Because of that, there was something that Emilia had to tell them.

"Ummm, after we move Subaru to the green room to rest, there's a place I would like you all to see…and someone I want to you to meet."

"…Is that related to the first floor?"

Emilia had cleared the final examination after going up to the first floor.

Beatrice and the others knew that much already. The issue was she had not explained anything else beyond that.

What was there, who she had met, what she had done.

It was such a strange and transcendent sort of thing that it was hard to know how to begin explaining, so…

"It isn't that long of a story, but it is a bit complicated, so do you mind just coming to see for yourself?"

Emilia pointed high above her head, toward the very top of the tower.

5

There was something rough rubbing his head.

"Ugh…"

Subaru groaned and opened his eyes.

Blinking his eyes until his blurry vision came a bit into focus, he saw the source of the roughness—Patrasche licking him with her red tongue.

"Patrasche…"

"______"

"Sorry for worrying you… You really outdid yourself this time, didn't you? Sorry for always asking so much."

Reaching out to his trusty steed, he smiled while patting her sharp face.

This black ground dragon was always saving him from danger. Of course there was a debt he owed her for saving him after he lost his memories, but on this last go-round, too, Patrasche had been left with an important role, since…

"Without Patrasche, Rem would have been in danger. Bringing her back is the greatest achievement of your life, Barusu."

"I can't totally deny it, so let's not dwell there. I pulled Beako out of the archive, and I recovered Emilia-tan's handkerchief for her, too. Though Roswaal was pulling strings on both of those."

More accurately, Roswaal wasn't actually involved with Beatrice's issue, but putting it that way would stick it to Ram better, so he didn't correct it.

As usual, Ram scoffed in aggravation at that.

Seeing Ram leaning against the wall and holding her arms, Subaru narrowed his eyes at just how painfully battered she looked.

"…Sorry, Ram. Because of me, you…mggggh!"

"Don't be stupid. It's your fault that I was injured? You aren't the primary cause of anything in my life. The mere thought is disgusting."

"Disgusting is a bit much! And it's totally scary when you stick clumps of plants in people's mouths all of a sudden!"

Subaru was teary as he complained about having a clump of vines stuffed in his mouth.

"Ha," Ram laughed, not feeling the least bit guilty.

There was a giggle at that.

"You two really do get along. You look like siblings."

Meili was sitting on the green mat of vegetation on the floor, her legs splayed out while the tiny red scorpion sat on her head.

Ram scowled at that.

"Barusu, a sibling…? Even if I accept for the sake of argument that he is a hapless, hopeless brother unrelated by blood, anyone as useless as him would have been kicked out, to have fewer mouths to feed."

"Was it really that Spartan in the Oni village? I'm glad I'm not an Oni, I guess…"

"I was lying. I would have kicked you out simply because of the revulsion."

"Don't layer hypotheticals! That makes things so complicated!"

Subaru fired back with a spittle-flecked shout in response to Ram's standard tune.

But he also understood that in her own roundabout way, it was a show of concern for him on her part. She was telling him that his decision wasn't why she had been injured.

That curt attitude, like always, was just like Ram. He looked around the room at the people in the green room. Subaru and Patrasche, Ram, and Meili with the tiny red scorpion. And the sleeping princess lying on the bed in the farthest back of the room.

"…Rem hasn't woken up?"

"Unfortunately, no. I removed the head of that loathsome boor. Thanks to that, it seems Lady Emilia returned, but…"

"Julius and Rem haven't… What's missing?"

Pushing his fist against his palm, Subaru bit down in disgust.

It was a reminder again of what they had been talking about before he passed out. In the end, they had to directly ask Gluttony how to eradicate all the effects of their authority.

"So this is the injured list? Where did Emilia-tan and them go?"

"They went upstairs to meet someone. On the first floor, so way, way up there… You know who it is, don't you, Ms. Ram?"

"It's nothing important. Just a big and forgetful violent old person."

"A forgetful, violent old person at the top of the watchtower definitely sounds like some key NPC…"

When he thought about a new person joining the cast at such a late point, Subaru furrowed his brow. Who was the person Ram was describing? If it was an examiner like Reid on the second floor, then was it that loathsome Sage?

"Then…"

"Barusu, quit using Shaula to feel better about your own powerlessness."

The blood started rising to his head, but Ram's cool voice stopped him before he could stand up. He caught his breath and looked at Ram. She had him dead to rights.

"I heard about Shaula. She was loud and unrefined and had holes for eyes, to be so attached to you…but she wasn't so bad she deserved to disappear."

"———"

"If you regret it, then don't get angry. Cry. I'm sure she would be happier if you cried instead of using her as an excuse to vent. And so would I."

"Ram…"

"Though I still think she was wrong about the person she cared so much about."

Ram flicked his forehead with that last bit. Knocked back down by it, even though it didn't hurt, Subaru touched his forehead.

"Sorry…"

"Besides, if it were Flugel on the first floor, Lady Emilia and I would have beaten him half to death before you could do anything."

"…I don't know about Emilia-tan, but I could definitely see you doing that."

Considering what happened to Shaula, it was natural to think everyone in the tower would have some anger to spare for Flugel.

"But then who is the old guy on the first floor…?"

"Just leave it for now. Even if they are of some use, it would be in asking about the victims of the Archbishop of Lust, not Gluttony."

"That sounds like a big development, but…okay…"

Ram already had a clear priority order when it came to those things, and her ability to say so without hesitation was one of her strong points.

And Subaru felt much the same. The possibility of saving Lust's victims was tremendous. But it was Gluttony's victims that he most wanted to save. And he couldn't help wondering if there had been a better way to do that.

"…Fool."

"Big sis?"

"If you have time to waste worrying over such pointless things, then focus on resting your body and mind. You aren't the only one here who failed to make the optimal choices."

Ram shook her head and touched her forehead.

There was a delicate scar on the place where her horn had once been. Rubbing it, she then reached out toward Rem and lovingly caressed her sister's forehead, too.

"I borrowed Rem's strength to defeat the Archbishop of Gluttony. I won as a result, but the price was heavy… I made her bear quite a heavy burden."

"That's…"

"I fought like I did when I still had my horn. If you had been carrying the burden then, your insides would have burst."

Subaru knew all too well that she wasn't exaggerating. Ram experienced hell just going about her day, breathing and acting normal.

If she became serious…he couldn't begin to imagine how bad the feedback would be.

"Rem might resent it when she wakes up. But I don't regret it. I'm her big sister. Even if she hates me or holds a grudge, nothing will change… I only did it to make good on all of that."

"…Well, that struck painfully close to home."

Rather than regretting the past, set out to make a better future. That was Ram's declaration.

Outside of those thoughts, though, Subaru had raced to bend the past many times before.

If Ram's outlook was the ultimate sort of constructive perspective, Subaru's Return by Death was the pinnacle of living in the past. His ability that allowed him to change what happened was always the result of some past that he regretted.

"Though it's always better not having to use it…"

Releasing his fist that had clenched again, Subaru smiled bitterly.

He acknowledged his attitude of using that ability to work hard for a future where everyone could smile together. And also, he reminded himself not to wallow in the Return by Death itself.

Because even here, he had seen so many tears and heard so many voices lamenting his death.

"I don't really get it, but it looks like you're feeling a bit better, mister."

Meili commented on his general demeanor as she played with her hair and said, with her knees up:

"They can cheer you up, but I can't, so don't get too down. You promised you'd be a good role model for me, right?"

"Yeah, I did, didn't I? All right, next time I'll keep it for sure."

Subaru nodded, looking at Meili and the scorpion on her head.

And then, as if giving his resolve a little push, Patrasche rubbed against his cheek. Even as hard and rough as her scaly skin was, once he was used to it, it didn't hurt to have it rub against his cheek. With a heartfelt appreciation for that show of affection, he stood up.

He had been so exhausted, he couldn't even stay up earlier, but it felt like some of his stamina had recovered. *All hail the gracious and great green room spirit.*

"Even Joseph was part of that all-out fight, but thinking how much the spirit in this room has helped us, no matter how much I thank them, it'll never be enough…"

The room they had been using as a heal point was home to a spirit that seemed to like healing living things' wounds, at least according to Shaula.

That was why Rem had been in this room from the moment they arrived at the tower.

"Well, not that we're lounging here because we want to."

"The spirit, huh? You're…no, it would just be a waste of breath. What if it was the effect of Julius's blessing that brought it into existence?"

"I see what you're getting at, but my allure is only effective on Beako, so I'm not too bitter. If it really was Julius's blessing, then I wonder if we can communicate with it…?"

At a simple level, Julius's blessing made it easy for spirits to like him. Thanks to that, he was contracted to six quasi-spirits—now fully realized spirits—but if as a result, they could communicate with the spirit in this room, it would increase their range of options.

That spirit had been in this tower as long as Shaula, or maybe even longer.

Maybe that nameless being could help in solving the riddles of this tower…

"Ram? Why the weird look?"

"…I feel an odd sort of air. This is—"

Just as she was about to say what it felt like…

"What?!"

Suddenly, a light filled the center of the green room, stunning all of them.

Freezing at the sudden change, Subaru and Ram both leaped toward Rem. Meili and Patrasche were both obviously on guard, moving away from the light.

"Wait, what? What is that?!"

"No clue! For now, stay close! We don't know what… Whoa?!"

Moving between Meili and the light, he cut himself off while he warned her to be careful.

The reason was because the light grew stronger, blinding him. Covering his face with his arm, he cautiously peered into the light.

The light gradually weakened and faded. Unsure whether to be relieved or wary, Subaru saw it.

"—Huh?"

Seeing it there, where the light had been, Subaru couldn't comprehend it.

He was speechless, stunned, and speechless again.

"…A girl?"

Beside him, Ram was wary at seeing the same thing.

She was correct. She and Subaru were seeing the same thing. However, Subaru's perception of that girl was completely different from hers.

Subaru knew her name.

Because the girl lying on the floor of the green room was…

"Louis Arneb."

Louis Arneb had appeared in the center of the green room in a burst of light.

The youngest sister of the three Gluttony siblings, the gorger who should have been inhabiting the corridors of memory. Subaru was speechless to see her outside like this.

But Ram didn't let that name pass.

"Louis Arneb…that's the name of the final Gluttony."

"Y-yeah, that's right. I didn't get to talk too much about it…but that's the final Gluttony, Louis Arneb. Lye's and Roy's little sister, supposedly…"

"…From the looks of it, she's unconscious."

Looking closer, Subaru agreed with Ram's cold observation. Louis was sleeping.

Sleeping? He couldn't say the situation for sure. And why had she appeared here at all? As terrified as she was of Subaru and as broken by Return by Death as she had been, it was hard to imagine her recovering enough in these couple hours to try again.

That was just how deep a scar death left on a person's heart.

"She's not supposed to have a real body in the first place… Damn it, this doesn't make any sense! Meili! Go get Emilia-tan and the others! Ram and I'll watch her!"

"Mrgh, you're such a harsh taskmaster… Don't go dying, now, all right?"

Edging backward, Meili moved to the room's entrance. Subaru flashed a thumbs-up at her reminder. On top of her head, the little red scorpion raised its pincer, as if copying him, and she turned around and headed to the first floor to get the others.

Left behind in the room, Subaru and Ram…

"…Let's not jump to conclusions for now. We should wait for Lady Emilia and Lady Beatrice to return. Once they're back—"

Then we can discuss how to deal with Louis was probably what she would have said. But she didn't finish saying it.

Before she could—black destruction crashed over the Pleiades Watchtower.

"—?!"

There was a thud, as if a big explosion had happened down below, and their bodies floated up into the air.

The next moment, slamming into the ceiling and wall, Subaru shouted in pain. Looking around to see what had happened, he noticed something.

The gruesome presence approaching gave him goose bumps all over.

"No way…"

Shaking off the feeling that this should not be happening, he stood back up. But the cold chill just grew stronger, turning into something far more concrete than his disbelief.

It was the obstacle that he had most wanted not to come—one that until this moment should not have been possible—and yet it was wreaking a terrible destruction on the tower anyway.

"Patrasche! Get Ram!"

"—*Tsss*"

Lifting up Ram, who was kneeling on the ground, unable to get up, he tossed her over to Patrasche. Despite the terrible wounds all over her body, Patrasche caught Rem, and guessing Subaru's intent, she started running to the green room's exit.

"Barusu, you idiot…!"

Subaru couldn't afford to listen to Ram's complaints. He dashed across the wavering ground; he raced over to Rem on her bed of vines. Lifting her up, he turned to follow Patrasche to the exit…

"______"

…When he saw Louis lying on the floor.

"Argh! Shit! Damn it all!"

As he cursed angrily, the adrenaline coursing through him granted him a momentary brute strength in an emergency. With Rem's body under his right arm, he grabbed Louis's arm with his left hand.

They were both light. And in an emergency like this, he could carry them both without worrying about the weight.

Holding the both of them, Subaru was just about to leap out of the room…

"______"

…when the dark shadow burst through the floor, coming between him and the exit—the dark shadow.

The final obstacle that he had wanted to believe wouldn't come—the dark shadow of the Witch, who was so attached to him—had attacked the tower now, of all times.

"Ram!"

He tried to at least get Rem out from the shadow. However, the darkness covered everything in front of him, not allowing any opening. And on top of that, it continued to flow into the room, swallowing up everything to his left and right and behind him.

"Damn it…but I made it this far…!"

Seeing the onrushing shadow, he felt regret fill his heart as he searched for an escape.

If it swallowed him up, he would die and end up returning by death. If the restart point didn't get updated, he would end up having to redo this with Louis Arneb still inside him.

If that happened, it would mean being controlled by the Archbishop in the form of that pale little girl again.

Even though he had burned everything, to finish this loop, out of fear of that exact situation…

"Barusu! Get ahold of yourself! You'll make Rem cry!!!"

"—*Tsss*!!!"

Ram's and Patrasche's desperate voices rang out through the shadow.

He took a breath to answer, but he couldn't get the words out. The black shadow swallowed him whole first.

6

Swallowed up by the enormous shadow, Subaru's consciousness drifted in darkness.

Losing his arms, legs, blood, flesh, his very being, he experienced a moment of déjà vu.

Swallowed up by some enormous sort of feeling, he felt himself being blotted out.

"I love you."

He could hear the whispers of the very darkness itself.

Now that's a nostalgic voice, Natsuki Subaru's consciousness thought sarcastically.

He was starting to get used to being told he was loved. It was almost like he was some elegant knight surrounded by his six loving spirits. Unfortunately, Subaru wasn't that dependable. And he was already filled up with love to give. He was already really pushing himself, in fact.

"But I do want to push myself when it comes to that…"

"I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you."

"Sorry, but I can't really answer that… That phrase is kind of triggering at the moment. I just screwed up saving the last person who said that to me."

"I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you."

"…Guess neither of us are in a listening mood. Then just go ahead and swallow me up. Let's get this over with."

There was no hope of getting out alive once he found himself in this empty place. Natsuki Subaru would just cruelly die in this darkness. Instead of lamenting it, he accepted it, turning it into fuel for his anger and determination to fight.

"If I go back now, the worst case might be waiting for me. Louis might be back to her senses and seriously coming for my ability again."

"I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you."

"But I'm not gonna lose. I won't. Next time, I'll keep my promise."

"I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you."

"I'll fight as many times as I need to for the day after tomorrow."

He wouldn't let that love crush him.

Sorry, but if those words were going to hurt me, then I've already suffered as much pain from them as I could a little while ago. That love is not going to bind Natsuki Subaru anymore.

But even Subaru's rejection couldn't affect those whispers of love.

It was as if that blind love was trying to blot out the entire world, consuming Natsuki Subaru's existence, pulling him into the darkness…

"—I love you. I love you."

"—I am Volcanica. By ancient oath, I ask thy will."

The next moment, an awesome blue light slammed into the shadow consuming the world.

The color of the world changed in an instant as the furious light devoured the darkness…

"Ugh…"

Feeling something rough rubbing against his face, Subaru groaned and opened his eyes.

His consciousness slowly rose to the surface, and opening his eyes, he saw the blurry world gradually clear up.

The rough feeling against his cheek continued throughout all that.

"Aaagh?"

A rough feeling and unfamiliar voice. He had assumed the tongue licking his cheek was his trusty ground dragon's, but…

"Ugh?!"

—It was Louis Arneb, straddling him, licking his face.

"Ugh, whoaaaa?!"

Shocked by that impossible scene, he immediately pushed Louis away. She cried out and rolled across the ground.

"Wh-wh-what the hell?! What are you doing?! Mocking me again…"

"Ugh, uuuh? Whaaah."

"Not whah! What, what happened…did I die…?"

Glaring at Louis in disbelief, Subaru raised his voice frantically.

Louis was lying flat on the grass, groaning and flailing her arms and legs like a child. He didn't know what her goal was, or what… No, more importantly…

"Where is this…?"

Subaru tore his attention away from the Archbishop as he cautiously checked his surroundings.

He was greeted by a wide, vibrantly green plain. There were flowers here and there swaying in the breeze. It was an impossible sight for the Auguria Dunes.

"The grass…is real. And it tastes…bleh, bleh! It's definitely grass!"

The clump he pulled up smelled like vegetation. It was the real deal.

And his wounds and the condition of his clothes, the scars of the battle earlier that had enveloped the entire Pleiades Watchtower were still there.

Meaning that battle had actually happened, and Subaru had not died yet.

The enormous black shadow that had attacked the green room. He had survived being swallowed up by…

"—Rem! Where's Rem…?"

If Louis was there, then Rem should be, too, since he had been holding her. Ignoring Louis, he immediately scanned the surroundings for Rem. And before long, he saw her lying quietly in the short grass.

"Rem! Ahhh, thank goodness! You're, you're really safe…"

Running over, he confirmed she wasn't injured and slumped in relief.

There were no obvious external wounds. Her body heat and breathing were the same as ever. With a heartfelt relief, Subaru wiped the sweat from his brow and looked around.

There was no trace of the tower or his friends anywhere.

"Emilia-tan!!! Beako!!! Ram!!!"

"Uh, ahhh!"

He shouted in the hopes that even if he couldn't see them, they might still answer, but his voice echoed hollowly. The only response came from Louis, lying on the ground.

Whatever she was planning in this unmanageable situation, he was the only one who could protect Rem, so he stood up to confront Louis…

"——"

As he moved his arms to get up, there was a tug.

"…Eh?"

A hoarse gasp escaped him. The pull on the hem of his clothes wasn't that strong. But still, he couldn't move.

"——"

His knees trembling, he started sweating incomprehensibly heavily.

It was a genuinely strange impulse. His insides all started moving, and everything that made up the human Natsuki Subaru went wild, stricken by the sight.

"…Ah."

Slowly, her eyelids quivered, beginning to open.

The faint blue of a clear lake that had been hidden behind those eyelids.

He had loved how joyous and cheerful her eyes were. Their occasional impish gleam. That pleading gleam that made his heart ache.

He had always, always, always loved that gleam.

"Re…"

His heart leaped, his throat quivered, and he was speechless, like something was blocked.

It was blocked. It was. His chest was filled with so many emotions.

The words he wanted to say, the things he wanted to tell her, the pleas he wanted to make—they were all bottled up inside.

"…Rem."

His lips quivered, calling her name wistfully.

Pathetically, even just that much was a struggle that he failed several times to achieve.

Had he said it clearly enough for her to understand? Or was it just his imagination, and he'd failed to convey the most important things?

"Rem, Rem…Rem…Remmm…Rem!"

A stream of tears poured from his eyes each time he spoke her name.

"———"

Blinking quietly, her eyes showed a faint but clear light.

At that point, he could tell that his desperate plea really wasn't just a trick of his eyes.

She was really there…Rem was there.

"…Ah."

Weakly moving her lips, Rem tried to say something.

Just a single hoarse sound from her lips was heartrending to Subaru.

Talking to her as she slept all this time, her shallow, sleeping breaths his only confirmation she was still alive.

He had spent so many days and nights vowing in his heart to get her back. But in all that time, he had never once heard her voice.

Closing his eyes, he could remember her voice calling to him, saying his name, all the time they had spent together.

But they were all memories.

He wanted to hear her voice again in a new tomorrow.

And that was finally coming true. That wish was finally being realized.

"Rem…it's all right. Take your time…"

"…Ugh…"

Her lips slowly, impatiently quivered.

He should be getting her some water to drink, but there was no obvious water around, and he couldn't take his eyes off her.

One word was enough. If she would just say his name again.

Just that one word would be enough…

"…re…ou…"

"…Rem?"

Her lips moved softly, seeking something to wet her hoarse throat.

She wet her tongue with saliva and managed to summon enough strength to open her mouth.

And in those blue eyes where Subaru could see his reflection…

"Who are you?"

Kneeling there, peering into her face, Subaru caught his breath.

When he finally let go of the breath that he'd been holding for a painfully long time, he thumped his chest.

Again, and a third time, pleading with himself.

You already considered this possibility…

He had considered the possibility that Rem wouldn't remember him when she woke up. Considering Gluttony's authority, it was a natural progression. It was entirely plausible she would wake still having lost her name or memories.

It was entirely plausible, so there was no way he wouldn't have considered it. Of course, that didn't mean the impact, the pain of it was nothing. But he wasn't so pitiful to act the tragic hero, despairing and cursing his fate or raging at the unfairness of it all.

And more than anything, she had already told him:

"Show me how cool you are, Subaru."

"…My name is Natsuki Subaru."

Clenching his teeth, Subaru looked down as the grief threatened to overcome him, and his expression twisted.

Rubbing his face, he put on his best brave face and smiled at Rem. With that cheerful, entirely unfounded smile that was befitting of Natsuki Subaru.

"You might not remember it yet, but I'm…"

"You are…?"

Subaru's words trailed off for a moment, and he closed his eyes tightly. And then he looked back into those blue eyes and continued.

"I'm you're hero… I've been waiting to see you again, Rem."

And with that, for the sake of the girl to whom he had made his vow, he introduced himself as a hero.

Donning the scarred and battered image of a hero, the boy took up that title again for this girl's sake.

I'll renew it here. To start my story with her again from zero.

<END>

AFTERWORD

The sixth arc of *Re:ZERO -Starting Life Again in Another World-* is complete!

Hello! This is Tappei Nagatsuki plus the mouse-colored cat! Thank you for sticking with me this long!

With that, the sixth arc that began with Volume 21 is complete, and things have reached a stopping point.

There may be some feeling like it was really something, choosing to end at a place like that. And you would be correct. Subaru still does not have a moment to catch his breath.

The story is barreling straight into the seventh arc with an update to the party members. *Re:ZERO* is a story where the solutions and the highlighted characters change with each arc, so I hope you continue to enjoy that aspect of it, too.

There may also be some thinking like, “Hey, isn’t this volume a bit heftier than usual?!” and you, too, are correct. It’s a lot thicker than usual this time.

That is also why this afterword is so dense—a last resort to finish the sixth arc!

And as you can tell, the limit of the page width is already fast approaching, so let’s move on to the usual thanks!

To my Editor I: you said, “If it’s unreasonable, please say so quickly,” and it was indeed unreasonable. The usual page count was absolutely impossible. I will do my best in the future and take your “Never again!” to heart. We are in this together, like two horses in a harness! Thank you so much!

To the illustrator Otsuka, it helped a lot that you were reading the web version that I was working on simultaneously and could smoothly have the images ready! But I can’t just rely on your helpfulness, so I’ll be careful next time! I really do look forward to working with you on the next one, too!

To the designer Kusano, the cover with such odious characters on it is a masterpiece. I'm sorry for the underwhelming vocabulary I use for my thank-yous in each volume. I love you! (A sudden confession?)

In manga news, both Atori's and Aikawa's adaptation of the fourth arc and Tsubata Nozaki's *The Love Ballad of the Sword Devil* are both being published in *Gekkan Comic Alive*! Minori Tsukahara's *The Frozen Bond* is running in Manga UP. Thank you all so much!

And to everyone else at MF Bunko J's editorial division, the proofreader, and all the bookstores, thank you very much for all your work. I'll be in your care next time as well!

And, straddling the new year, the second half of the second season of the anime begins in January! Director Watase, the cast, and the staff, thank you all so much!

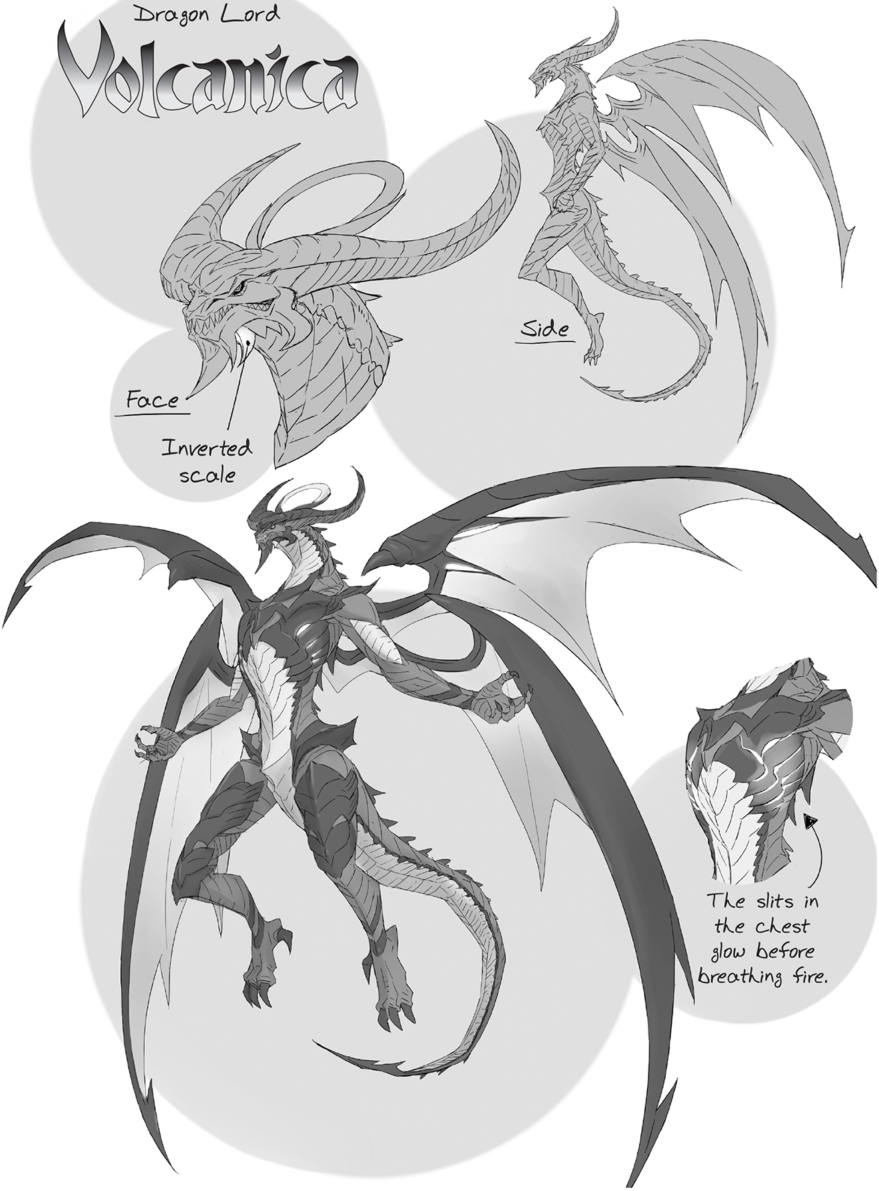
And finally, I am grateful for all the readers who continue to support this series.

With the end of the sixth arc, *Re:ZERO* has reached a turning point, so I hope you will continue to join me!

Let's meet again in the next volume, at the next hardship! Thank you!

December 2020

< < *With gratitude to everyone's efforts in this difficult year* > >


Dragon Lord
Volcanica
Face
Inverted scale
Side
The slits in the chest glow before breathing fire.

Subaru
Shaula

"Drumroll, please! And with that, I'm here again for the announcements! It's playtime with the newly restored Master!"

"It's not playtime! But you really have been on a roll, showing up here again. Even though this was one of the few places where I was supposed to have an edge over everyone else…"

"You don't have to define yourself so narrow-mindedly—you're still my evening star! You don't need to feel down! Just fall in love!"

"Well, the closer last time was me falling for a different reason, but… Anyway, let's show the people our perfect harmony, eh?"

"Ooooh?! Are you finally coming on to me?! Should I cook red rice tonight?!"

"No. So, about the anime. The second season that left on such a cliff-hanger is picking up again with the second cour starting on January sixth!"

"You crying, suffering, groaning, vomiting… Argh, I'll be clinging to the screen, hanging on every moment! I cut out everything around you on the new key visuals!"

"I guess that's a novel way to enjoy it? Why not focus on Emilia-tan or Beako?!"

"Also, also, volume three of the manga version of the fourth arc goes on sale in December! The Master there has a different feel and look from the anime and light novel…three delicious versions of Master! So check out *Re:Zero -Starting Life Again in Another World-!*"

"Has there ever been anyone who was this big a fan of me personally…?"

"I mean, you're the entire appeal of this story, Master!"

"That's overselling it. Like, that's actually kind of a sick perspective… Anyway, I'm grateful to say it is almost just a normal occurrence at this point, but thank you to the Shibuya Marui for holding a birthday event for Ram and Rem again this year. There is another special illustration by Shinichirou Otsuka this year, too!"

"Ahh, those twins with you. Huh? I don't think I've seen that blue one moving and talking before…"

"Then check out the very end of this volume! Did you seriously not watch anything other than me in the anime?!"

"Even in the game 'The False Royal Candidate,' coming out January twenty-eighth, all I see is you, Master. I can't wait for it to come out, but a month is just like the day after tomorrow! I can totally wait that long!"

"…Ah, right. After that, next is…"

"—That's it, Master. Announcements done. Our flirty little playtime is going on hold for a while, too."

"…Dumbass, I told you, this isn't playtime."

“That cold shoulder is just another part of your charm—I’ll love you forever, Master.”

“…You really are dumb… See you later, Shaula.”

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